

Volunteers Travel From Middle Georgia to Help Haitian Refugees in Neighboring Dominica

By Isabel Wright

The world's attention focused on the plight of many Haitians living in squalid conditions after the massive earthquake in the vicinity of Port-au-Prince earlier this year. As it happened, a group of volunteers, primarily members of Mulberry Street United Methodist Church in Macon, were packing for a trip to the Dominican Republic under the leadership of Lee Triesenberg. Their primary goal was to provide assistance to Haitians who years ago fled their homeland seeking a safe haven in the country next door. Instead, according to Mark Johnston, spokesman for the mission, the refugees were rounded up and confined immediately after crossing the border. They will likely spend the rest of their lives in deplorable circumstances, with very little hope of escaping.

The local name for one of these compounds is *batey*. They may look like plantations, but they are not. The crude houses that dot the scraggly landscape seem to have been cobbled together with whatever materials could be found. One of the many photos taken by Johnston, facilities director at Carlyle Place, shows a man plying off the tin outer covering of an old, discarded refrigerator to supplement his hut's leaky thatch roof as protection from the elements. Another picture shows two tiny, shabby outhouses, unpleasant and unsanitary looking, to say the least. Unbelievably, they serve the entire population in one *batey* with some 2,000 inhabitants.

Food is also scarce at these sites, the Macon group's leaders point out. Surveys sponsored by a non-profit, non-political, multi-nation humanitarian organization, called the Batey Relief Alliance, can be studied on the internet. The figures tell the story: 54,000 to 75,000 children under five years of age suffer from chronic malnutrition and about 27% of the adult population is under nourished.

This was to be primarily a medical mission, however. Therefore, Joy Humphrey, a teacher at the College of Middle Georgia Nursing School in nearby Dublin, Ga., and nine of her students, together with Johnston's wife, Caren, a registered nurse at the Medical Center, staffed a made-shift clinic. There they examined patients, treating simple injuries and infections, and handing out medications donated by medical units and suppliers in Macon. A Cuban doctor and a Dominican official provided medical supervision.

The group also brought with them more than 250 pairs of shoes to distribute to *batey* residents, especially the children, who have very little clothing to wear. The harboring nation is apparently not sympathetic to their plight. Youngsters without shoes, for instance, are not permitted to get on school buses under Dominican law," Johnston says. "As a result, very few are educated."

When the meager supply of footwear was depleted, Caren Johnston and some of the other volunteers took off their own shoes and handed them out as well. Her husband is currently organizing a shoe donation drive in Macon, seeking sandals, in particular. He has already shipped out hundreds of pairs, largely at his own expense.

"An eye clinic was also established," he says. Corrective lenses were ground on site and the finished glasses were distributed as prescribed. One young girl is pictured as she left the clinic, beaming from ear to ear, her eyes shining brightly behind new pink plastic frames.

Johnston was particularly impressed by the children's demeanor at a particular batey. "No fighting, no pushing, no shoving in the long lines, even when the give-aways were running out." A native Haitian, it turned out, had been teaching manners and civility to those youngsters.

"Everywhere we went," he says, "we were greeted by hugs and smiles. The people knew we were there to help."

Indeed, most of the children the group encountered seemed to be happy in spite of the extreme poverty surrounding them. "They have no toys as we know them, but a kid with a rusty, old bicycle wheel or a stick and an empty spool for tape can entertain himself for hours."

When the word got out that the visiting Good Samaritans were distributing soccer balls, one young fellow ran after the volunteers' bus for a mile or so, pleading and reaching his hands out all the way. The bus stopped and he got his wish. After supper at night, the mission team played ball with the youngsters. "We had a blast – grown-ups and kids."

At week's end, the volunteers took a four-hour bus ride each way across rocky, dusty, unpaved roads to bring food supplements to earthquake victims in the tent city in the capital of Haiti. They couldn't go so far, the mission group felt, and not rearrange their plans to lend a hand there, too.

Now back with their families and jobs in Middle Georgia, you might think these folks would be emotionally drained, but you'd be wrong. The euphoria remains. "I'd go back again," Johnston says. "It was a fantastic experience. I gained more from the people than I gave."

Triesenberg grins at this. She says about Johnston, "He came back a changed man."

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