



# One Week in Haiti

## ...six months after the earthquake

By Susan Koenig

While many of the Grand Traverse Region's area residents were enjoying the 4th-of-July fireworks, I was accompanying Dr. Marty Arkin, M.D., en route to Fond des Blancs, Haiti, 70 miles southwest of the capital, Port au Prince, to participate in an eye clinic for rural Haitians.

It was Marty's second trip to Haiti, my first. A thousand patients and 30 surgeries later, we are back home, reflecting. Why would anyone pay to be tortured for 12 hours a day in 100 degree heat?

Dramatically beautiful and staggeringly impoverished, Haiti was devastated by an earthquake on January 12. The damage is catastrophic, and there are thousands of tent encampments on public land, private land, even along the median of the main artery connecting Port au Prince to the rest of the country. Dr. Arkin's expedition, originally planned for March, was postponed because of the uncer-

demical poverty has become its historical condition. But Haitians are resilient... and they will prevail."

### SENDING SUPPLIES

Bringing everything we needed was a huge endeavor. Beginning in February, Bay Eye Associates had begun sending supplies with other people who were heading to Haiti, and each person on our team brought the maximum allowed (two bags, 50 pounds each, one carry-on).

We did not have the problem, common to many aid organizations, of losing equipment in the black hole of the Haitian Customs Authority which has been holding supplies, demanding not only exorbitant storage fees, but also 20% duty.

In addition to kind friends who contributed cash, our three area hospitals (Paul Oliver, Munson Medical Center, NW Michigan Surgery Center), gave or loaned the mission supplies and delicate equipment. Alcon Lab-

St. Boniface foundation 20 years ago. We lived in luxury compared to many other aid workers, and certainly to the vast majority of the Haitian population, with screens on our windows, recently installed ceiling fans, toilets that flushed (more or less), and running (albeit sparsely) water.

### LOCAL CONDITIONS

The cacophony of nightly noises (roosters, donkeys, dogs) kept most of us awake much of the night. We had a refrigerator, powered by a generator, which struggled mightily to keep everything cold, especially the day's reward—Prestige Beer, bottled in Haiti. Each evening Haitian ladies would prepare a delicious hot stew of goat, chicken, pig or fish, always accompanied by rice and beans.



clockwise from top left:  
The author with two Haitian patients at the eye clinic.

A market in the village of Fond des Blancs.

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### BIG WELCOME

We arrived in the impaired but functioning airport to a welcoming 15-piece band. After customs and baggage claim (chaotic, but not scary), we met our drivers. A truck carried our supplies, and we rode in the hospital ambulance, hip-to-hip and knee-to-knee, for five hours over extraordinarily bad terrain, fording rivers, up steep hills, through the earthquake zone along the coastline, and into the countryside.

We passed ubiquitous rubble and donated tents of varying colors and sizes, packed together in broiling heat, porta-potties lining the road, people bathing and filling buckets from polluted streams and runoffs, vendors selling whatever they can, goats rummaging in the dirt with the occasional small pig, and dogs that all look alike. I saw no cats.

Once we were out of the quake area, the other Haiti emerged in stunning views of sea, mountains, and verdant countryside—still impoverished, but, somehow, more natural, more hopeful. Says Sean Penn, who has been running a camp in Petionville since January: "There is a strength of character in the people who have, by and large, never experienced comfort. Haiti has been plundered, raped, despoiled and skinned for so long, en-

will prevail."

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In addition to kind friends who contributed cash, our three area hospitals (Paul Oliver, Munson Medical Center, NW Michigan Surgery Center), gave or loaned the mission supplies and delicate equipment. Alcon Laboratories donated a machine called a phaco which helps extract cataracts. Bausch and Lomb, Advanced Medical Optics, and Watkins Pharmacy provided medicines and other essentials to perform intricate surgeries.

Dr. Marty Arkin, who has been in practice in Traverse City for 16 years, was the key player and worked the hardest. The operating room conditions were marginal, and he was always the last one at the dinner table. His "team," assembled from all over the country by St. Boniface Haiti Foundation, included a nurse practitioner, her two sisters and a Haitian-born friend, two optometrists, one optician from Orlando, and me in the role of interpreter/translator. We were assisted by a Haitian doctor, two nurses, and two medical school students.

Dr. Arkin felt that performing 30 surgeries (versus 13 two years ago and in one less day) was a great feat, and said that our group was "about the best I've been with. Everyone got along and enjoyed each other." Indeed, there was no time for conflict, despite the broiling heat and minor inconveniences of communal living. I never worked so hard in my life. We had patients of all ages arriving from near and far, most on foot, and they were lining up as early as 4:30 a.m.. We opened the clinic at 7:30, and the last patient left about 12 hours later.

We were housed, dormitory style, in a concrete block building above the clinic and adjacent to the hospital, established by the

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There was little time to socialize because we were so exhausted and, in the dark, it would have been impossible to navigate the rutted rock-filled paths that led to the tiny village. My two adventures were an early morning motorcycle ride around the environs and a walk through the market in an 18th century atmosphere of donkeys, peasant vendors and flimsy market stalls.

The hospital used to service only rural residents of Fond des Blancs. Post earthquake, however, it has become a neurocenter of 30 to 40 beds, with many homeless patients, including a young mother who arrived pregnant, the night of the earthquake. Her baby was born in April, but she will never walk again. There is a resident physical therapist providing rehabilitation as well as companionship.

I spoke French to most of the Haitians, especially those who had some education. Creole, more commonly used by the predominantly illiterate population, is a quasi-phonetic French, combined with African and indigenous Taino vocabularies. Fortunately, the universal desire to communicate is more than half the battle, and there was much laughter amidst the hugs and handshakes.

Each day we tried to set up a triage system and impose some order on the crowds that increased daily as word spread about the clinic. People who really needed attention were pushed to the front of the line. Patients



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A market in the village of Fond des Blancs.

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The Eye Team, with Dr. Martin Arkin, MD.,

squeezed into a narrow waiting room where we interviewed them, checked their sight with a symbol chart, lined them up for dilating drops followed by an eye exam, and finally into the "eye boutique" where, among thousands of donated glasses, we tried to match prescriptions to patients.

Almost all Haitians suffer eye irritation from charcoal pollution and unrelenting sun, so we dispensed sunglasses and eye soothing drops, as well as pencils, paper, crayons, toys and toothbrushes to the children.

Spruced up in their Sunday best—bright white shirts, colorful hair decorations, fancy hats or head scarves—everyone was respectful and appreciative, quiet and patient. While we were sweating profusely, guzzling from our water bottles, they sat stoically, unaffected apparently, by the long wait and extreme heat.

What did I take away from Haiti, besides a bottle of delicious Haitian rum? An image of a population surviving symbiotically, eking out a living using skills honed by centuries of deprivation; the high spirits of homeless teenagers relegated to lives in wheelchairs due to spinal chord injuries sustained in the quake; people of unyielding "lafwa et lespwa" (faith and hope); and a bond among ten strangers united by a common purpose, all vowing to return.