



Mission to Haiti 2010

Cindy Lavigne OTR/L CHT

I am not a writer but I hope that I am able to convey to you what impact this Mission trip to Haiti had on my life ...on my heart. It was both Heart wrenching and Heart warming. For me, I found that Haiti was a country of contrasts... Beautiful mountains and beaches laced with filthy garbage. The land is so rich in natural resources yet the country was in an economic crisis. There was evidence of beautiful Spanish architecture amidst cardboard and rusty metal huts and now tent homes.

The people were so very gentle and loving (even well groomed) yet living in such poor conditions, many not knowing where their next meal was coming from. In this day and age, It was very difficult for me to make sense of it all.

I had been led to come to Haiti after watching the first news clip about the devastation caused by the Earthquake. As a Hand Therapist my heart was being tugged to go help. As days went by the Calling became stronger and I eventually prepared my husband that I had to go. As usual, I had his support although I knew he was concerned for my safety. I had shared my plans with my co-workers one of whom, Deb was also feeling the tug to go help and the others generously agreed to cover our patients. Deb and her husband had lived in Haiti for a year of Medical service 30 years ago. Her love for the people had not left her.

My initial plans to go to Haiti through a local volunteer organization did not work out. They were going to be located in Port au Prince and I found out 2 days before I was suppose to leave that my safety, food and water supply could not be guaranteed. By this time, I had suitcases filled with Hand Therapy supplies donated by work, friends, and family, had all my shots and paperwork completed and was dreaming every night of helping the Haitian people. I was so ready to go...but now so disappointed. I knew that I was meant to go and it was not just a feeling...it truly was a Divine Calling. I searched the internet , looking for another Medical group that would be safe and organized. I googled "Hand Therapist needed in Haiti". Northwest Haiti Christian Mission out of Kentucky popped up. They were recently blessed in February with the volunteer services of Dr Joseph Sheppard, seasoned Hand Surgeon from Arizona. I was so excited! This was the confirmation that I needed to contact this group. They made all the detailed arrangements and I was scheduled to leave in 2 weeks for a 10day short term mission and my co-worker, Deb would leave the week after I returned. Those 2 weeks before leaving I managed to get advice from a PT, Monica who had been volunteering for this mission for the past 7 years and Dr Sheppard's office assistant Phyllis, who helped to prepare me for this trip.

Finally the day had come for me to leave. After many hours of connecting flights and hauling two 50lbs suitcases and one 25lbs carry-on, I was finally at the Port au Prince airport where I connected up with a 20 person Medical team from Illinois going to same Mission (now on their 10th trip with them). The Mission staff swiftly and safely transported us out of Port au Prince and off to another smaller airport where we flew into Port au Paix which was about 1 hour truck ride from our final destination, Saint Luis du Nord. This small coastal city was situated in the northwest Haiti mountains where the Mission's main complex was located and about 20,000 people from Port au Prince relocated after the quake. The area was beautiful



however the garbage and poverty was painful to see. The Mission was behind a guarded gate which opened into a quaint courtyard, The staff welcomed and oriented us to the facility where there were living quarters for volunteers, a home for the elderly, community meals program where they feed 700 people, a birthing center, 24 hour emergency walk-in center, a week-day medical clinic, eye clinic, bible college, church, small school for the deaf, a traditional elementary school and 2 orphanages. One orphanage for fairly healthy young ones and the other for severely handicapped children who had been abandoned on the streets. With malnutrition and poor medical care, infant mortality and birth defects were common. In Haiti half of the people follow Christian beliefs, others Voo doo teachings and some follow both, if that's possible. In the Voo doo belief system birth defects are seen a curse and need to be destroyed for fear of evil cursing the whole family. It was sad for me to see the burden and fears that the Voodoo religion placed on the people. Those parents who chose to keep their handicapped children were very brave.

The next week is still somewhat of a blur for me. No one really knew what Hand Therapy was but they did give me a 8X10 room to use in the Medical clinic and my personal translator, Nahum. We immediately got to work setting up the clinic with supplies hanging all over the walls, organized like a store display. The splint pan was ready and I was ready to serve. I introduced myself to the Medical staff via the translator. They were all very nice but I wondered if they really understood what I was trying to say. We sat in the clinic waiting for patients to come and after 3 hours no one came. I was discouraged and wondered if my calling to be there really was from me and not God. I prayed for patients to come and then decided to walk thru the line of 200 patients waiting to see the doctor. I found a young boy who had a torn diaper wrapped around his hand. Via my translator I asked him what had happened and had he seen the doctor yet. He said "yes", and was waiting to get medication. I immediately went to the doctor to ask if I could show the young boy hand exercises. He agreed to let me do it. Day 1 I saw my first patient. It was a start. Day 2, again we sat in the clinic for 2 hours and still no patients came. I did not want to leave the clinic room so that we could maintain a presence there to the Medical staff. While waiting, I decided to show Nahum how to make a hand splint. As I was making the splint, a nurse glanced in the room and was curious. I invited her in, then she showed me her swollen wrists (De Quervain's tendonitis). I invited her to sit down and made her 2 long thumb spica splints. She smiled, hugged and thanked me in Creole. I was glad to finally help someone. Over the next hour I saw 7 staff workers and then had 30 patients waiting in line needing to see me. Both Nahum and I were ecstatic and overwhelmed. My Calling to be there was finally confirmed. From that day on, I became now known as the "Hand Lady". I can't remember how they said it in Creole, but each time I heard it, it made me smile. Day 3, we treated 44 people. I say "we" because Nahum had now become my therapy aid. By now the doctor was calling for me to help him in the ER to bandage and splint fresh Arm/ hand wounds and fractures I could not believe that they did not diagnose using the x-ray machine or treat with casting. The more traumatic injuries once stabilized were sent to a hospital 1 hour away via a very bumpy and treacherous road. One night the doctor called for me to see a man with a machetti laceration to his wrist. The flexor tendons and I'm sure median nerve and radial artery were lacerated. The doctor closed the wound and asked me to bandage and splint him so that he would be ready for transport. I did and advised him not to try and move his fingers. The American nurse helping out said "Cindy, it doesn't matter,



they will not have anyone there at the hospital to repair the nerve and tendons". I was so sad to hear this. This man was the sole supporter for his family, and he was young and it was his dominant hand. I left the ER, went back to bed and thought about what had just happened. I knew what this man's outcome would be and I couldn't help but cry thinking about it. It really was primitive medicine here, but I had to tell myself that it was certainly better than nothing. Fortunately for my emotions, most of the cases that I saw in the clinic were overuse tendonitis, sprains, strains, cysts and older fractures. These people were such hard workers and many injuries were from vigorously scrubbing to clean clothes, working as masons and housekeepers for the mission and mechanics. I was glad to be able to locate one of the post op cases that Dr Sheppard had seen for tendon and nerve repair 2 months prior. This patient had no formal therapy since surgery and had severe scar adhesions with very limited tendon gliding. After 3 days of intense therapy both the patient and I were encouraged to see the fingers moving to the point that his fist was about 30%. I could not have expected better as I knew that he needed more therapy and would have to wait months before the nerves would regenerate enough to give him a more functional hand. He was so compliant with his extensive home program including all the splinting and I was glad that my co-worker would be arriving a week after I left so that she could continue his therapy. Although I knew that he would probably need tenolysis surgery in the future to further free up his tendons, there was a chance that maybe this could happen. More Surgical teams were being scheduled to arrive at the Mission later on this spring and summer. This was my last patient before closing up the clinic to leave for home. Both he and his wife hugged and kissed me with great gratitude and he told me that he had prayed to God for Him to send someone like me to help him. I was his answer to prayer and he asked God to bless my life. Again I told him goodbye and let him know that it was a privilege to work with him. I then left the clinic and went up to my bed area and cried again. These people were really finding a place in my heart. I have so many more heart warming stories to share from measuring the handicapped children for wheelchairs that were going to be donated to making a thermoplastic foot for a man's prosthetic leg so that he could walk again to get free food at the Mission. After 10 days of being there, I found that there are numerous ways that a Hand Therapist could serve the people of Haiti. I know that I will come back here some day and will do my best to recruit other Hand Therapists to come as well. My hardest task will be in trying to convince my husband that maybe when we retire we could spend 2mos in the winter here.

Cindy Lavigne OTR/L CHT
ProCare Physical Therapy and Hand Center

(See photographs below)



