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A growing mission of mercy and sharing



Mercy & Sharing is a non-profit public charity whose goal is to provide hope and opportunity to abused, abandoned and disabled children in Haiti. Pictured in this photo is a Haitian boy named Enoch. Photo by Mark Atkinson.

Aspen-based Haiti relief workers reflect seven months after the earthquake

by **Andrew Travers**, Aspen Daily News Staff Writer
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In the seven months since an earthquake registering 7.0 on the Richter scale demolished Haiti, the Aspen-based relief organization Mercy & Sharing has expanded the number of people they serve there nearly five-fold. Meanwhile, they've battled the apocalyptic conditions of the ravaged island — and their own destroyed facilities — along with the ongoing political upheaval that has characterized Haiti for centuries.

The 16-year-old organization's Aspen-based founders, Joe and Susie Krabacher, also have found themselves strangely at odds with start-up foreign-aid organizations and orphanages now coming to the island.

Joe runs much of Mercy & Sharing's administration out of his law office behind the Hotel Jerome in Aspen. Susie has devoted herself to Mercy & Sharing full-time over the last two decades, and has become a prominent global spokeswoman for the children of Haiti. She is a former Playboy centerfold — Fox News has taken to calling her "Haiti's Playmate" — and the author of "Angels of a Lower Flight," a memoir of her own abusive childhood and journey from the Playboy Mansion to the slums of Haiti, a nation which has made her an honorary citizen for her service.

When the Jan. 12 quake struck, she was driving from Denver to Aspen on Interstate 70. She got a phone call from Joe, at his office, with their in-Haiti director Raphaelle Chenet conference-called in. Susie heard little more than a scream from Chenet, who was near the earthquake epicenter in Petionville. Then the connection went dead.

"There were dead bodies all over," Chenet recalled from Port-au-Prince last week. "There were electrical cables. I saw buildings collapse in front of me. It's something I don't wish on anybody."

Among the 230,000 killed in the quake, they later learned, were Mercy & Sharing staff, doctors, care-givers and children.

"I have flashbacks all the time," Chenet said of that first day, which the Port-au Prince native and former USAID administrator spent trying to find her family, and the Mercy & Sharing children.

Among the most ghastly and unforgettable moments Chenet recalls from the immediate aftermath is a woman in the street, burned beyond recognition and screaming out her own name in the hopes someone would know who she was, and help her.

"She had no face. Her nose, her hair, everything was gone," Chenet said. "Now, I constantly ask in my mind: 'Is she alive? Whatever happened to her?' I don't know."

Unforeseen rivals

By the time the quake hit Haiti, the Krabachers' mission already had a well-established reputation there, forged by a decade-and-a-half of service on the island, as well as a working, yet sometimes-rocky relationship with the government's jumbled social services administration and ties to the impoverished communities where they run nutrition programs, clinics, schools and orphanages.

Since the catastrophe, however, the Krabachers said they've seen an influx of both well-intentioned but poorly-prepared start-ups, as well as disingenuous sham orphanages aimed at turning a profit.

“Adoption and child sponsorship is the biggest money-making operation in Haiti right now,” Susie said last week. “Everybody and their aunt is starting one. You can raise a lot of money if you have kids in rags who look hungry. A lot of them will round up 50 kids from the neighborhood every time a white person shows up — and once the foreigner leaves, everybody goes home.”

That frustrating new phenomenon in the long-neglected and impoverished communities which the Krabachers have made their life’s work, they believe, is now keeping some children from getting the help they need.

This past Thursday, Chenet was turned away from a temporary children’s home run by a well-known international non-governmental organization. Chenet had been working on an agreement through which Mercy & Sharing would take as many as 100 children from there into a permanent Mercy & Sharing home for orphans. They shut her out, she and the Krabachers believe, because the organization is raising money from international donors based largely on the number of children in their facility.

“These kids are being used for people to raise money,” Chenet said from Port-au-Prince.

The competition for donations, they believe, is depriving more kids from Mercy & Sharing’s successful rehabilitation model. Years ago they stopped adopting out children to the U.S. or elsewhere, and instead raising them into adulthood in Haiti.

“I have nothing against adoption,” Susie said. “But we’ve found that a lot of adoptive families cherry-pick — they want a baby that is perfectly healthy. The fact is that every child that has come through Mercy & Sharing has some trauma. They’ve either been left in a box to die, or left in a hospital to die or have been abandoned in the streets for months or years. We don’t have any ‘perfect’ children, the kind that might get chosen for adoption ... We are very adamant about raising the kids to become leaders in their own country, not cherry-picking the best, the healthiest, the cutest, and sending them off to foreign countries.”

Chenet said she believes Haiti’s children should grow up proud of their homeland, not trying to flee it.

“The children are Haitian, they should be raised as Haitians and to give back to their country,” she said.

Growing need

Through its clinics, schools, orphanages and food programs, Mercy & Sharing was regularly serving about 5,100 Haitians before the earthquake. Their programs now handle about 23,000.

Its facilities include a school with 417 kids in Port-au-Prince and another in the Cite Soleil slum, which was leveled in the quake, and is now operating with 175 students in a nearby rented building. The Port-au-Prince clinic also was completely destroyed, and is now operating on the



After the earthquake in Haiti, Susie Krabacher of Mercy & Sharing asks Haitian Children to raise their hands if they are brave heroes. Photo by Bill Stelzer.

same site in a mobile facility inside of a shipping container, which Joe Krabacher calls “basically a turn-key clinic.”

Forty miles north of Port-au-Prince, on Mercy & Sharing’s 20-acre Williamson campus, they’re operating two orphanages and a community clinic where they see up to 100 patients a day. On the northern coast, in an area called Cap-Haïtien, they run a nutrition program that is among the only resources for food and drinkable water.

They’ve shipped about 300 tons of food and aid into Haiti since January.

The Williamson campus also includes a church, and prayer plays a prominent role in Mercy & Sharing’s operations. Though the Krabachers are devout practicing Christians, their ministry is not officially religion-based.

The schools run from kindergarten through grade 13, using an enhanced version of the Haitian education curriculum, which includes health classes and, since the disaster, art therapy instruction.

On the state exam that qualifies children to move on to secondary education, Mercy & Sharing last year saw 98 percent of their children pass. Country-wide, just 40 percent normally do so. They currently have six teenagers in their schools whom they are prepping for college — a Mercy & Sharing first — who will most likely engage in higher education in Cuba or the Dominican Republic. Visa restrictions have nullified U.S. colleges as an option, Susie said.

CNN anchor Anderson Cooper visited the Williamson campus in April and broadcasted a segment on his show from the facility, which he praised as an ideal model for sustainable relief in Haiti.



Photo courtesy Mercy & Sharing

Children are shown here who were found after the Jan. 12 earthquake in Haiti and were brought to one of Mercy & Sharing's orphanages by the Haitian government.

In July at the Aspen Ideas Festival, Susie met Harlem Children's Zone founder Geoffrey Canada, whose much-hailed experimental program combines educational, social and medical services in

Harlem, NY. She hopes to adapt the model to Mercy & Sharing's Haiti operations with Canada's help.

Haiti's government-run hospital unit for abandoned babies in Port-au-Prince was destroyed in the earthquake, and Mercy & Sharing had worked closely with the children there. The government is now moving abandoned or orphaned kids directly into tent cities temporarily while they process them in the social services system.

"The social affairs offices are pretty much inoperable," Susie said. "They lost all of their records, too. So the children are being placed in the tent cities right now and then moved, directly after their paper work is done, to orphanages like ours."

The Krabachers don't get paychecks for their own work, but they do currently employ 176 Haitians full-time. As the scope of their work expands, they believe they will double their Haitian staff in the next year.

Rubble and riots

Half a year after the quake, much of Port-au-Prince is still rubble. So much rubble, in fact, that it's estimated it would still take 1,000 dump trucks working all day every day for the next three years to clear it all.

On top of that, the country is now in the throes of yet more upheaval from citizen uprisings attempting to unseat President René Préval.

For Chenet and the Mercy & Sharing staff, that means some danger and more logistical delays in the disaster zone.

"You have riots all over the streets right now," she said. "People are throwing rocks, burning tires — you just can't get from place to place sometimes. Or it takes a day to get somewhere you normally go in 20 minutes."

The election is not until November, and rioting and unrest is expected to continue until President Préval is replaced. For Mercy & Sharing, and other relief organizations, Susie said, that regime change will likely speed progress.

"The government is complaining that they are not getting any of the money that's coming to Haiti from the international community," she explained. "Meanwhile, the international community is saying, 'We're not going to give you any funds until you get a stable government that is transparent.' So it's a catch-22."

The result, for now, is that just 2 percent of the \$5.3 billion throughout the world that's been pledged for Haiti has been allocated.

The organized crime and gangs that orphaned many of Mercy & Sharing's children along with the quake, however, is largely leaving them alone because of the work the Krabachers have been doing there since 1994.

"We've been in Cite Soleil for so long that a lot of the gang members have had their children in my schools over the years and, unfortunately, without Mercy & Sharing those kids wouldn't have been eating," Susie said. "They wouldn't have any medical care, they wouldn't have any education. So, we don't work with that organized criminal element. But we do pretty much get left alone by them because of what we're offering to their children."

They are still battling the enduring child slave trade in Haiti. It's legal in Haiti for families to keep a child slave, known as a "restavek," until they turn 14.

"One of the things we still deal with at the clinics almost daily is restaveks who come to us with STDs, and cuts and bruises from being beaten by their host family," Susie said. "But Mercy & Sharing is working actively against it."

To Chenet and the Krabachers' continued astonishment, most of the families who keep restaveks are poor ones also living in areas like Cite Soleil.

Were it not for Mercy & Sharing, Chenet believes the children she works with daily would be trapped in that life of pseudo-slavery, or worse.

"Right now they would either be dead, in the street, some of them would be beggars, little girls would be getting raped, and little boys too, or people might take them home to become restaveks," she said.

The magnitude of the ongoing crisis in her native country is so massive that Chenet holds out little hope of seeing it reverse course in her lifetime. But the kids she works with daily are the best chance Haiti has, she's come to believe.

"These children give me hope that there is a future for Haiti," she said. "My generation won't be able to do anything about this country, so I have to hope that the best thing to come out of this situation will be through these children. I thank God I have Mercy & Sharing, because otherwise I don't see how I could go on."

To learn more about Mercy & Sharing, visit www.haitichildren.org.

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