

# MISSION to haiti

Nursing students serve in the aftermath of January's devastating earthquake

Within two weeks of the deadly earthquake in Haiti, two teams of Union University nursing students and faculty went to work helping victims. They served in a makeshift hospital at Fond Parisien, Haiti, and a few miles to the east at a similar facility just across the border in Jimani, Dominican Republic.

The teams worked long hours in separate one-week shifts, but they brought home similar stories of suffering, sacrifice and service.

Difficult conditions are not unknown to Union nursing students and faculty. They have ongoing relationships within the Dominican Republic and provide several teams each year to help with routine medical care in the villages near Santo Domingo.

But following the January earthquake, nursing faculty members investigated ways they could both help earthquake victims and maintain their annual commitment to people in the Dominican Republic.

Some served in the Dominican Republic, but many others chose to help victims of the earthquake which killed an estimated 200,000 people and injured another 300,000.

## Tenderness is "not something you can teach"

"When we left the Dominican at one in the morning, we had had about a six to seven hour bus ride," said Molly Wright, assistant program director for nurse anesthesia. "We would ride all night and then report for work at 7 o'clock in the morning."

Wright says she was not prepared for the poverty she witnessed across the border in Haiti, and that the





initial rounds the nurses made revealed the deepest depths of human suffering.

"The people who were crying, the people who were in pain, waiting for someone to take care of them—nothing can prepare you for that," Wright said.

The teams brought supplies and anesthesia, but conditions were difficult and complete relief from pain for the patients wasn't always possible. Such was the case with one toddler who needed part of her foot amputated.

"For this little girl, what we were giving her wasn't enough," remembers William Janovich, a Union nurse anesthesia student from Cordova who went to Fond Parisien. "She needed more. To bridge that gap, I started singing to her."

Janovich says he held her head and softly sang "Jesus Loves Me" and "Jesus Loves the Little Children" repeatedly until the procedure was completed. Nurse Anesthesia Program Director Pamela Binns-Turner watched Janovich work.

"To watch the tenderness with which he cared for that baby was amazing," says Binns-Turner. "That's not something you can teach."

## Reinforcements in Jimani

In Jimani, the need and desire to provide quality health care to the earthquake victims of nearby Haiti is great. Resources are strained.

The nurse-to-patient ratio was 30-to-1 prior to the arrival of the Union nursing team. Many who were providing surgical and post-operative care had no idea the reinforcements were headed their way. When the buses rolled in, hospital administrators at first were stunned—and then quietly wept tears of joy.

"People were amazed that (Union) had that many people who would be willing to come," said School of Nursing Dean Timothy Smith, who led the first of two groups that helped earthquake victims. "We were able to go in and take care of large numbers of people, and that was a de-stressor for them."

Several times the administrators of the makeshift hospital would walk by Smith, tapping him on the shoulder whispering "you are blessed!"

The Union group had divided into teams, and most of the nursing students and faculty went right to work with primary patient care. Three in the party, including Smith, helped with anesthesia for the surgeries.

"We just did surgery after surgery, and many of the patients went to surgery every day," Smith said.

The makeshift hospital building had six tiny operating rooms. There was little ventilation, and only a few places in the building had air conditioning. Some 225 patients were spread out among a few rooms in the hospital, another small adjacent building, and scores of tents.

"I actually had mixed feelings about going to the border or through to Haiti," said Bethany Giacobozzi, a Union nurse anesthesia student from Boston who plans to graduate later this year.

There was little preparation for the pain and suffering the groups observed.

"Going to each individual tent was shocking, just to see the actual environments that they were living in," said Giacobozzi. "A lot of times, a single tent held four different families."

## Showing the Love of Christ

Both Union teams found it difficult to leave the earthquake victims. In Fond Parisien, departure was delayed about 30 minutes because students insisted that the next shift needed a full report on the needs of their patients.

"They might not have done anything to change their lives, but for that moment in time, those people would see a smile or compassion," Wright said. "They would know that they had been shown the love of Christ."

Giacobozzi said the trip put other events in her life in a new perspective. Things that had been so important to her a few days before the trip—her classes and graduation plans—suddenly moved to the back of her mind. Leaving the camp was difficult.

"I just wanted to stay so that I could see people throughout those tents being able to walk and being able to be transported back home."

That might take six months or more.

"They accepted it and they did very well," Smith said of the students, "but getting them on the bus (to leave) the last day was tough." 📖

