

Quake survivor returns, pleads for aid

By Paul Jones Marinscope Newspapers

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It was 5 p.m. when former San Rafael teacher Barbara Wander felt the earth shaking in Haiti.

"It was like the van was jumping about," she told a small audience at Dominican University's Creekside Room the afternoon of Jan. 28.

"When I got out of the van it looked like there were fires everywhere, because there were these plumes of smoke. But it was dust from all the buildings collapsing."

Wander and company made their way to a hill near Riviere Froide, a school run by an order of Haitian nuns where Wander was volunteering. Schoolchildren were running downhill. When Wander got to the top, she saw that the school buildings where poorer students had been attending late classes had collapsed, one level onto the other. The effort to rescue sisters and students began immediately.

"You have to understand that the Haitians had no idea what had happened. They had never experienced an earthquake," Wander said. "We had at least 30 guys that would dive into the school, and then we'd have aftershocks, big-time aftershocks. And they would have to come out, and when the aftershock was over, they would turn around and go right back in. That night they pulled out about 100 kids. The courage of the Haitians, not understanding what this was, and still going in to pull out kids, was very special."

An errand of mercy

Wander has worked in Haiti for years with the Little Sisters of St. Therese, who operated roughly 42 missions throughout the impoverished nation before the devastating earthquake Jan. 12. The Riviere Froide facility provided education to poor students and programs for handicapped children, and at a separate complex nearby, sisters cared for patients with AIDS and tuberculosis.

"When I came to Haiti this time, I was going to meet some people in the U.S.," Wander said. "This was the first time in five years I felt it

was safe to encourage people to come, and Blue Ridge Community College in Virginia wanted to send some people and meet some of the artists that I know, and possibly buy some of their works. So I came a week early, and planned out an exhibition.”

Wander was also working to establish rabbit farming at the patient center operated by the sisters. In addition to feeling the country’s security was improved, she said she was surprised to find another indicator that things might be looking up.

“I knew things were improving when I saw this sign: ‘Please, students, you can’t take a cell phone into class.’ I thought we were really going to have a successful time this trip,” she said.

After working on rabbit hutches, Wander and other volunteers were traveling back to the school, where they were staying. When the earthquake hit, the nature of her mission changed from improving lives to saving them.

Out from the rubble

“We got to the top of the hill, and there was still a little light out,” she said. “I could see one of the buildings that had collapsed, and I knew there were three sisters in it. One sister had made it out, and she was white with dust, and she didn’t know about the other two. Because the building had pancaked, I crawled up on the roof. I was looking for Sister Jean Baptiste, and magically there was a small hole, and I looked down and saw her. So we widened the hole, and we grabbed her and pulled her out.”

The fate of the other sister wasn’t known. As the evening light faded, the men worked to evacuate the children, some 100 of whom were removed alive, though nearly 27 of them died after.

“The afternoon school has about 350 students,” she said. “We estimate about 100 died in the school.”

The complex was devastated. The few buildings left standing weren’t safe, so survivors had no shelter.

“Even the walls they had for security all fell down,” she said. “During the night, some bands of guys would come. I told them, ‘Right now Haiti doesn’t need bandits, Haiti needs good men,’ and that they needed to leave. And almost all of them did.”

The next day, families who lived farther away arrived, looking for their children. Workers continued digging into the buildings, including the one where the three sisters had been during the quake.

"Almost 24 hours to the minute after the quake, they had broken through the concrete roof and floors, and they saw these hand movements all of a sudden, and the hand had a little rosary in it," Wander said. "That was the third sister. She had been sitting on a chair on the ground floor, and had two chairs on either side of her. When she was thrown out of her seat the two chairs had caught the roof."

Those who'd escaped the collapse tended to the wounded. Among other duties, Wander was tasked with collecting keys until she said that she and the others realized "we had all the keys, but none of the doors." As time passed, more trips were made into standing buildings to grab supplies, although some, like the church, were too damaged to risk any entry. A kitchen was set up outside, and recently donated blankets were used to keep people warm during the cold nights. There was also the matter of dealing with the dead.

"I knew I needed to show reverence to the dead children and their lives, so I went down and made the sign of the cross on each forehead, and they had so much dust on them, there was a cross left on them," Wander said. "We had to bury bodies quickly. There's no embalming and the days are very hot. We're hoping to get some tents. We still don't have much food and water there now."

The medical center where the sick were cared for was also demolished by the quake.

"We know definitely three patients died," Wander said. "I don't know how many more. There were 10 hospital buildings there. As far as I know only one or two are still standing. Sister Evelyn worked so hard to get those new buildings and take care of the patients. They're living outside now, so I would anticipate the night air is going to kill some of them. When the rains come, there are going to be big problems. They start in March or April, and hurricane season begins around July or August."

Help is still needed

The deaths in Haiti are mostly the result of effectively nonexistent

building codes, Wander said, Most buildings in Haiti were built to withstand hurricanes, not earthquakes.

“You build one floor, and when you get more money to add on to a school or something, you build another on top. But the structure isn’t designed for that, and there are voids in the concrete,” Wander said. “The truth is we are never going to be able to build in Haiti to the standards of the U.S. If we tried to do that, nobody would have a place to live. But the sisters very much want to rebuild everything, and they want to do so as safely as possible.”

Wander left for the United States to seek aid for survivors by sharing her story. She plans to raise money and awareness, then return. On her trip back, she traveled through Port-au-Prince, where people are living in tents, too afraid to re-enter buildings left standing, many of which are structurally compromised. The government is largely unable to help, and even religious institutions are compromised.

“The cathedral was severely damaged, and the bishop and his staff died, and that was really hard for many people,” Wander said.

Wander was evacuated to Florida, and has been asking for support since she returned. “Right now I think I can do more here than there. I need to make phone calls and send e-mails,” she said.

Barbara Wander says donations in the form of checks should be made out to the Sisters of Loretto, and specified for Haiti. Checks should be mailed to 515 Nerinx Road, Nerinx, Ky. 40049-9998.