CSB grad provides medical aid after quake in Haiti

By Kirsti Marohn • kmarohn@stcloudtimes.com • February 23, 2010

Theresa Reichert had seen the Third World and treated its sick.

As a nursing student at the College of St. Benedict, she had studied abroad in South Africa. After graduation, she spent six months working in Calcutta, India.

They were nothing like Haiti.

Two weeks after an earthquake rendered much of that country a wasteland, Reichert read an e-mail from a colleague asking for volunteer nurses. She responded immediately. Less than 24 hours later, she was on a plane.

The 2005 College of St. Benedict graduate had seen her share of trauma, both abroad and as an emergency room nurse at Children’s Hospital in Minneapolis.

But Haiti would be different. After two weeks there, she would return burdened with photos of gauze-wrapped children with beaming smiles, with stories of unbearable loss and of new babies born amid the devastation.

What was different about this trip was the feeling of guilt over not being able to do more. To stay longer. To help more people.

Reichert returned Feb. 5 to the apartment she shares with her husband on the St. John’s University campus. She’s preparing to start a new job at St. Cloud Hospital. For now, she’s home.

She wants to go back.

As we left the airport compound, there were people everywhere, just standing along the road. I didn’t see a ton of completely damaged buildings, but even seeing one totally collapsed building is very surreal and the thought that someone could be in there is heart-wrenching.

... Shortly after arriving we heard that a truck had dropped off 22 patients at the clinic and they needed our help sooner than we could get there. We walked in and I hardly even had a chance to take in my surroundings, it was unreal. So many people.

Reichert volunteered with an organization that had operated an orphanage and women’s clinic in Port-au-Prince.

When the earthquake hit, its mission changed overnight. The orphans were sent to their adoptive homes, and the orphanage became a makeshift hospital. The clinic began treating the injured, as many as 80 a day.

Reichert and the other volunteers began treating patients almost immediately. Most of the injuries were from what the Haitians called “the blocks.” Head injuries, crushed limbs and skulls, broken bones, torn skin. Many of the injured had suffered nearly two weeks with little or no medical treatment.

The first patient she treated was a little boy whose mother had been cooking dinner when the earthquake hit. His face was scalded with boiling water.

I have a gut of steel now. Everything and everyone we see smells because of their untreated wounds. It can be pretty pungent at times.

Another girl came in with a severely injured finger and a second finger with just a bone sticking out where the finger used to be. We amputated the finger with the bone sticking out, if you can even call it a finger, but despite our hesitations, dad wanted to keep the little girl’s other finger. We cleaned the wound and are keeping her
overnight in our inpatient "field" (everyone is afraid to be in buildings) but chances are she will lose the other finger too ... it is a really bad injury.

Another lady is on traction for her injured leg. Our version of traction: Some string tied around her foot brace and a chunk of cement. The very thing that injured her is providing her comfort.

Everywhere there was devastation: buildings in rubble, people sleeping outside or in tent cities.

The conditions at the clinic and hospital were much better. Patients were given three meals a day, medical care, clean sheets.

Thanks to donations, the staff had adequate medical supplies and worked to keep everything clean and sterile. Still, by American standards, conditions were primitive. There was no air conditioning, despite the 90-degree heat. Surgeries were performed on folding tables.

The staff worked 12-hour shifts that often stretched into 24 hours. They slept on cots at the hospital. They rode a truck into poor areas where people had no access to medical care, treating those they could and bringing people back to the hospital if necessary.

One little boy with a burn on his stomach was put on the truck by his older brother, who rode with him to the hospital and then returned home to tell their parents. When the boy awoke late at night, scared because his family wasn't there, the nurses comforted him.

He fell asleep on a cot next to Reichert, arms sprawled out, totally relaxed. He'd just wanted to be close to someone.

This is why she became a nurse.

Last night I fed our little girl who is malnourished. She no longer needs a feeding tube to eat and she cried last night because she wanted to eat, which was new for her. I fed her and then held her till she fell asleep. She doesn't eat well or sleep well unless she is held and it just helps me realize how truly connected we all are. I feel like I am able to understand what it truly means to be human. We are all connected, and I believe that our community extends beyond our homes and our country to those beyond our borders as well.

Reichert was amazed at the Haitians' perseverance despite the circumstances.

They joked with the staff and taught them some Creole words. The nurses taught them some medical terms and began to learn the details of some patients' stories.

Reichert bonded with a 15-year-old girl whose feet had been pierced with rebar. Later, she would learn that instead of running outside when the earthquake struck the girl ran back in to help her grandmother.

Another girl had been at school when the quake hit. She and her best friend ran to the door. The ceiling and walls collapsed and fell. Her hand was caught under block for three days, and the knee of her dead best friend was pressed against her skin and nerves, causing paralysis.

Still, amid the devastating loss, there was hope. One night, a baby was born, bringing a much-needed lift for those who had faced so much death. A promise of renewal in the midst of tragedy.

The two weeks flew by, and Reichert prepared to return home. She would bring stories and photos, as well as lessons learned from her patients.

From our baby who is malnourished, I have learned that strength can come from those around us when we may not have our own, and that a community of those who love you can revive you and strengthen you if you are brave enough to place your trust in another.

From our boy with the burns on his face, I learned that sometimes, we just have to take joy in the small moments, and
to take the time to let life soak in. He doesn't realize his face is burned and bandaged, nor does he realize that other people are feeling pity toward him. He just lives life with joy, day by day.

From another boy, I realized that sometimes all we need is to be held.

Another boy lost all of his family except his grandmother in the earthquake. From him I learned that we all have a strength inside of us that we never knew we had. We have the strength to serve, the strength to care for others, and we have the strength to move forward in our lives, despite the tragedies that may befall us.

(Editor's note: Portions of this report that are in italics are excerpts from e-mails Theresa Reichert sent to family and friends while she was in Haiti.)