

Once in a lifetime

by Laila Brown

A member of Team Broken Earth recounts her life-changing trip to Haiti

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Once in a lifetime you may participate in something extraordinary—a journey changing your view of the world and how you participate within that world. The ability to help others and teach them to cope under extreme circumstances, and to provide care to one another is one of the greatest gifts of humanity. I was fortunate to be a part of Team Broken Earth 2011. This is my story.

An M_w 7 earthquake on January 12, 2010, left Haiti in dire need of outside medical assistance. More than three million people were affected by the earthquake. The death toll was so overwhelming that corpses crowded the streets and had to be buried in mass, unmarked graves by heavy machinery. Three hundred thousand people were injured and more than one million rendered homeless. Despite dwindling media attention, health care and sanitation remain top priorities for Haiti.

Helping Haitians by providing stable, focused and forward-looking medical assistance and training is paramount in the rehabilitation of Haiti. It is for these reasons Team Broken Earth was

conceptualized by Dr. Andrew Furey. The team's mission is to establish and fund sustainable programs throughout rural Haitian communities, to train Haitian doctors, nurses, and allied health care workers, and to provide supplies, equipment and technologies to medical facilities in Haiti.

On my trip with Team Broken Earth in July 2011, 27 individuals travelled to Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and none of us will ever be the same. As one of 13 registered nurses, my role was to teach and provide care for the pediatric population presenting at the Bernard Mevs Hospital.

While working at the hospital, I experienced the devastation of the earthquake and the struggle of Haitians to survive and recover from the aftermath of the quake. The city remains in disarray. The presidential building still hangs in disrepair with its roof hanging off. People continue to be homeless and security is non-existent. Haitian children climb the broken walls of buildings, garbage lines the hillside, and adults sell their wares on the side of the road as a means of survival.

The pediatric unit consisted of NICU, PICU, pediatric ward, and a home to three orphans with special needs. Families would leave their children at the gate of the Bernard Mevs Hospital when they could no longer care for them.

It was not long before we learned that Haitians have a different expectation of their health care providers and hospitals. Haitians come to the hospital to die, while developed countries expect health care to save them. It was unfortunate, but unless they were critically ill, they did not get admitted to the gated hospital. No blood products were available. I remember one day when a family member needed blood as a result of a gunshot wound. The parent was sent out to get blood and bring it back to the hospital.



Thirteen RNs took part in the trip: Shirley Anne MacNeil, Carolyn Churchill, Geralyn Lambe, Jane Mulcahy, Robyn Noseworthy, Brenda Earles, Theresa Peacock, Lynn Anderson, Rochelle Mccarthy, Mary O'Brien, Laila Brown, Jacqueline Williams-Connolly, and Pamela Griffiths.



Me playing in a courtyard with a young girl. I had just given her my lunch and she was thanking me.

The parent brought back a unit of blood, not cross matched, just in a thermos bottle to keep it cool. We would hang the blood, as it was, because without it, the patient would die.

Children died of dehydration, head injuries, typhoid, cholera, and sepsis. Statistically, 35 per cent of children died before the age of five. Infant death was also high. Everyone was anemic due to lack of food and proper nutrition. Medicine for infections consisted of ampicillin, gentamycin, clindamycin, and vancomycin. Vancomycin was left for the most serious cases such as septicemia infections.

Surgical patients consisted of meningocele repair, cleft palate and lip, fractured femurs and elbows, and bowel obstructions from worm infestations—just to name a few. During our stay, our plastic surgeon Dr. Arthur Rideout made a few parents quite happy.

Our team was responsible for caring for more than 500 Haitian patients, both old and young. We helped run the hospital 24 hours a day for seven days. Team members worked every day to provide the best care we were capable of and to help as many Haitians as possible. While we were there, word got out that a medical team of 27 professionals, including a pediatric team, was helping at the Bernard Mevs Hospital. Referrals from various sources brought many Haitians in need to the gates of the hospital. The pediatric unit was filled to capacity with 18 patients in total. We cared for 28-week-old twins, one of whom



had necrotizing enterocolitis. They are still doing well and will hopefully be out of hospital soon. We keep in touch with the Haitian nurses through Facebook. They update us regularly and send us pictures.

The people of Haiti have shown me how to hope in the face of despair and devastation. They laugh, attend church, embrace hope, and continue to survive in a world of chaos. I could go on and on... there were so many experiences. It is unfortunate that I cannot relay them all. My experience was truly life changing. I look forward to returning to Haiti in July 2012 with Team Broken Earth.

About the author

Laila Brown received a bursary of \$500 through the Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions (CFNU) in support of her trip to Haiti. To learn more about CFNU's International Solidarity Fund, please visit: www.nursesunions.ca

Team Broken Earth is a non-profit group of Eastern Health employees providing medical assistance to Haiti's earthquake victims. The team works in collaboration with Project Medishare to provide immediate and forward-looking medical care and training to Haitians. Team Broken Earth has become a tremendous force in Haiti, capable of caring for more than 500 patients a week. Thank you to all of the registered nurses, physicians and physiotherapists who have taken part. For more information, visit www.brokenearth.ca