

From Haitian 'Ground Zero'

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Editor's note: Corey Aungst of Beech Creek, an EMT and volunteer relief worker, is in Haiti this week using his medical skills to help earthquake victims through Airline Ambassadors International. He is a flight attendant for United Airlines and a member of AAI. He has sent The Express his eye-witness account from Haiti:

We arrived via United Flight 9902 at Port Au Prince, Haiti, at 11:38 a.m. on Friday, Jan. 29. Words can't describe the devastation here.

Initially upon arrival we had to circle the airport for almost 30 minutes waiting for the opportunity to land at an airport no bigger than Piper Memorial Airport in Lock Haven. The airport was full of huge cargo planes from the United States, Canadian, Israeli, French and Australian militaries. Cargo with relief supplies was scattered everywhere at the airport with very little room left to maneuver any large aircraft.

We were then escorted by armed guards through passport control (which consisted of a small table and a lady with a stamp). We walked through leaking water, sewage and mud to the outside of the airport where we were met by my representative from Airline Ambassadors International, our non-governmental organization (NGO), our "Mission Command."

Then reality set in quickly that we were in Hell.

We were escorted to a compound that used to be a home with a wall around it. Now it is an armed staging area for AAI rescue personnel. The compound was crumbling with absolutely no running water or electricity. The earthquake completely destroyed everything around the compound.

Tent cities are set up in large clusters throughout Port Au Prince (mostly tarps strung from trees or tents with duct tape to make a shelter).

The United Nations constantly has armed military personnel patrolling the streets here. This city is a mess. I've been to a lot of poverty-stricken countries but this is the worst I've ever seen.

We were formed into teams. Jackie Lageman, a physician assistant in the State College area, and I were named team leaders for Team 3. AAI placed our team on a special mission, to reach out to smaller communities that haven't seen medical attention since the earthquake. Our mission happened to be with the church orphanage that is supported by our church, Blanchard Church of Christ.

In cooperation with our church, AAI has decided to take on the Christian orphanage in a small town north of Port Au Prince, called Fedja. The orphanage, named "All of God's Children," is now considered a mission project for AAI which will focus resources to support this orphanage and community. (This is a miracle in the works because AAI is one of the world's largest NGO's).

Fedja has only dirt roads which are very poorly maintained, no running water or electricity, no medical facility of any kind. It's very sad. We realize quickly how lucky we are.

This community has been overwhelmed with refugees from Port Au Prince who have sought help not available in either place.

The orphanage has taken our team in and is taking very good care of us. The staff gave us a place to rest, in a cement structure with air mattresses and no windows, just four walls and a roof - but much better than a tent in the middle of Port Au Prince.

Jackie and I have set up a make-shift clinic to start seeing patients in the town of Fedja. We set up this clinic in an abandoned house with medical supplies we brought with us, as well as a single crate of medical supplies that was air dropped via Task Force 2 from Los Angeles for us, thanks to Airline Ambassadors and the California Department of State.

We saw patients with some very unfortunate circumstances that wouldn't have seemed like a big deal in the United States. For instance, I saw patients with widespread infections, easily treatable in the United States. But with no healthcare available in Haiti, these patients were near death.

I had a patient come to our clinic to be seen because she stated she couldn't use one side of her body. I asked when these symptoms started and she told me about two weeks ago. I examined her and found that in fact she'd had a stroke and had suffered complete right-side paralysis. I had to explain to her there was no treatment available to her in the country and she likely would be paralyzed for the rest of her life. These are only a few of the sad stories we are encountering here.

The local community was so excited to see that we opened a small clinic, they were incredibly thankful. We saw hundreds of patients. We saw more than 200 Monday and expected the same for Tuesday. We also are at the clinic today.

The medical supplies and children's clothing donated by Lock Haven Hospital was given directly to the orphanage. Lock Haven and its surrounding communities are at Haitian Ground Zero working through us. The assistance received from home is being directly given to the people of Haiti who need it the most. We want our home communities to know they are truly part of our mission here.

Our next several days will include working with the children of the orphanage and some of the refugees, doing follow-ups on their health.