

BY SUZANNE BOURRET

Were the piles of garbage with hungry pigs and skinny dogs rooting through them bigger than she remembered?

Did she look for rats in the festering, garbage-laden open sewers along the roadways?

Was she afraid when helicopters hovered overhead as United Nations security gathered on full alert?

Or did Governor General Michaëlle Jean notice these things in her air-conditioned car as the cavalcade, with flashing lights and sirens, sped through the streets of Port-au-Prince?

She was reportedly on the verge of tears often during her recent visit for the inauguration of the new Haitian president René Préval. But then most are when they travel to Haiti.

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Life is as raw as it can get in this other world. It's difficult to believe there is a place like this in North America in 2006 — just a couple of hundred miles from Caribbean beaches where tourists sip margaritas and sun in luxury surroundings.

Haiti is the poorest country in the Western hemisphere. Eighty per cent of the population lives in abject poverty. The country suffers from rampant inflation, a lack of investment, widespread unemployment, a lack of infrastructure and a severe trade deficit.

As other travellers head for cruise ships, volunteers — some from the Hamilton area — fill a plane as it takes off from Miami International Airport for Haiti, just 750 miles away. There are American doctors, dentists, Mennonite missionaries and church groups. Danielle Mussche, an oncology nurse at Henderson General Hospital, and Joyce Vanduyne, a neo-natal nurse from McMaster University Medical Centre, are on their way to Port-au-Prince to do post-operative care for 18 children having surgery for hydrocephalus.

My group includes Peter and Cathy Johnson and Paul Benassi, a first-year McMaster student, who will volunteer until the end of June. Both of us have paid our own way just like the more than 500 from Hamilton who have been involved in short-term work teams since the early 1990s. We are on our way to spend a week at Albert Schweitzer Hospital in Deschapelle, northwest of Port-au-Prince.

The Johnsons of Hamilton have been to Haiti numerous times to volunteer. Peter is a former administrator at Henderson Hospital. Cathy is a former public health nurse. We will be joined by Dave Shuttleworth of Dundas who is flying from St. Maarten where his wife is the principal of the Caribbean International Academy. Peter and Dave, a retired vice-president of Canadian Credit Unions, will help the hospital develop its wage and salary administrative process. Cathy will organize birthing kits packed by Hamilton volunteers.

Hamilton people have a heart for Haiti. Work teams have built a church, orphanage and school in Cap-Haïtien at the northern tip of Haiti. Several groups have provided money for them through fundraisers. Three work teams have visited the hospital to make repairs to the aging building. Hamilton doctors, nurses and dental assistants have been on work projects and The Rotary Club of Ancaster has sent water pumps.

"It's like the ripple effect from a stone tossed in a still pond. The ripples spread further and wider," says Debbie Berquist-Jules, a Burlington nurse who was touched by Haitians when she first went there to work in 1989. She returned and is now the hospital's chief operating officer.

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Sunday morning. We're at the edge of Cité Soleil, the worst hell hole in Haiti. We head north up the coast on the main road out of Port-au-Prince. It's roughly paved, full of holes, deep ruts and washed out in places.

"Anyone with back problems or hemorrhoids will regret this trip," says Dave, who has made the trip twice. Gas is \$4 Canadian. There are a total of 4,160-km of roadways in Haiti, only one-quarter of them paved, according to The World Factbook.

We pass skeletal remains of transmissions, rusted cars and trucks abandoned at the side of the roads. People walk along the road or travel in brightly painted tap buses, so named for signaling boarding or exiting. There are mattresses, even coffins, along with more people on top of the buses. Dogs rummage for food in open trenches, chickens peck at the ground and women carry live chickens or pails of water on their heads. But the sun is shining and bright flowers bloom on trees and shrubs.

We pass a river that is drying up where people are washing their kids, cars and trucks. There are sounds of singing as we pass roadside churches filled with people. Those who walk to Sunday services are turned out as if going to a fancy wedding. There are no obese people to be seen.

We pass markets where women cook chicken on open charcoal fires and cemeteries where pastel-painted monuments are better looking than



SUZANNE BOURRET, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Rice and beans for sale in the Deschapelle marketplace. Below, children of a Deschapelle rug maker.



CATHY JOHNSON, SPECIAL TO THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Women walk in their bare feet down the mountains to the market where they load up with supplies and carry them on their heads, back up the mountain.



CATHY JOHNSON, SPECIAL TO THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

People carry supplies as they make their way over rubble following a landslide that sent boulders and rocks down the mountainside on the road to Port-au-Prince.

ANOTHER WORLD

Life is raw in Haiti, the poorest country in the Western hemisphere. Eighty per cent of the population lives in abject poverty. The country suffers from rampant inflation, a lack of investment, widespread unemployment, a lack of infrastructure and a severe trade deficit.

most living quarters.

Bald, naked mountains emerge. In 1987, 95 per cent of Haiti had been deforested, according to National Geographic. Trees have been felled for charcoal, the country's primary fuel. Erosion has stripped off most of the topsoil leaving bare rock. Landslides are increasing.

"It looks like a problem up ahead," says Cathy, sitting in the front seat beside Peter and the driver. She's right. We stop and watch as chaos unfolds. People pile out of about 50 buses, trucks and cars. There has been a landslide and the road is blocked.

I jump out and talk to Max from Indiana who belongs to a group trying to help small villages.

"I see the hopelessness of the people. It's worth your effort to come here."

Yet Haitians are resilient. Some from nearby villages come to sell food and drinks. Then more rocks tumble and we run. The driver manoeuvres the four-by-four over the rubble. We're told it's the fifth landslide in the area.

It's 10:30 a.m. We arrive at Moulin Sur Mer Beach for lunch. It's a quiet oasis with beautiful gardens and beach where volunteers go for respite before or after their work terms. Nicole Ombrun and her architect husband, Gerard, opened it in 1977. Ombrun is glum. Tourism is unstable since the uprising in 2004 when former president Jean-Bertrand Aristide was deposed. She hopes it will get better with the new government.

Back on the road, the countryside gets poorer. Mud and straw-roof houses line the road. Reed mats or plastic sheeting are used for walls.

By 4:30, we reach Deschapelle and the sprawling grounds of the Albert Schweitzer Hospital, where Larry and Gwen Mellon, of the well-known Mellon family of Pittsburgh, built the hospital in 1956 for \$3.5 million.

We settle in the alumni house, one of about 18 residences that house staff and volunteers. They have the luxury of hydro and water. The rest of the town doesn't. I have a room to myself



HOW TO HELP IN HAITI

Joy and Hope of Haiti:
905-522-5494

The Canadian Friends of Hospital Albert Schweitzer:
905-383-7153

First Verse, a poetry reading fundraiser for the Albert Schweitzer Hospital. Friday, June 9, 7:30 p.m. at First Unitarian Church, 170 Dundurn St. S. Call 905-540-4642 or write annebok-ma@cogeco.ca.

for a night. The next day a young woman, a third-year internist resident, arrives from Detroit to volunteer for a month in the hospital.

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Monday. Water is only available from 6 to 7 a.m. and the same time in the evening. Cold water trickles from the shower and it wakes you up fast.

At 7, we all gather in the hospital library for an X-ray conference where doctors and nurses discuss cases from the weekend. There is always a shortage of doctors and nurses.

The original 300-bed hospital has been fighting a \$2-million deficit for a number of years. Now there are 120 beds. The plan is to decrease it to 60 beds. Most Third-World countries do well with a 50-bed hospital, says Dr. Venkita Suresh, hospital CEO. Besides, the money left by the Mellon estate is running out.

We tour the crowded hospital and look into patient rooms where visitors

sleep under the bed. The whole family stays when a family member is admitted. They wash their clothes in an area outside the hospital.

We visit the Mellon house and the surrounding estate. L'Escale, the tuberculosis centre, hasn't had water for 1½ years. It sends children to fetch water at a public well used by the whole town. People wander aimlessly. There is one nurse for the 24 patients.

Paul shakes his head. "Look at Las Vegas. It has fountains for gardens and golf courses."

We pass children, dressed in uniforms, on their way to school. Many can't go because they don't have shoes. We arrive at the Health Centre where up to 40 sit on stone benches waiting to be seen. The government provides vaccines and birth control medication. The hospital provides pre- and post-natal care.

Nearby, about a dozen women stand at a well waiting for it to open. It's locked to conserve the water.

We tour the market where people crowd in about 40 stalls held up by crooked sticks. A handsome little boy, Kevin, about 8, smiles up at me and takes my hand as we walk along. I want to take him home.

★★★

Tuesday morning. The volunteer surgeon from Pennsylvania comes to breakfast in his scrubs. It's surgery day. He almost seems excited.

Over in the hospital library, Cathy, Paul and I count Tylenol for the pharmacy and then Cathy and I go to the dusty medical depot to count and pack birthing kits, made by Hamilton volunteers. The goal is to pack them into tool boxes donated by a Cambridge Home Hardware. They will be delivered to the mountain dispensaries where about 800 Haitian women serve as birthing attendants. Maternal and child health care and education are taught in remote mountain areas.

It's later in the day when I see the woman with leprosy sitting against the wall outside the staff compound. She

has no nose, just a socket and you can see right inside her face. Two teeth hang over her swollen gums. She rubs her stomach to show she is hungry.

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Wednesday. The three of us head into the mountains with a driver who is delivering supplies. We drive over rough roads that soon become like trails and pass women and children heading down the mountains to the market with baskets on their heads. They walk tall, their faces proud, their backs as straight as rods. And they walk for hours, then make the return trip up again with heavy supplies balanced on their heads.

We wind up and down around mountain tops, pass naked children and come to a one-room school where there is a blackboard, makeshift benches and where children sit in front of a desk that is so narrow, it couldn't hold a book. All are in immaculate uniforms.

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Thursday. We tour the wood-working building and the rug-making building where hand-loomed rugs are made and sold in the hospital boutique. Outside Deschapelle, we tour the new pipeline well site and the hospital farm. Back at the market, I look for Kevin, but I'm told his family had troubles and moved from town.

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Friday. It's 6 a.m. and time to leave. Debbie waves us off. We pass the same dismal scenes as Haitians get ready for another day. Cathy and I talk about coming back with a work team. I think of Kevin and all the other children I've seen. And I wonder about their future.

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