

Moved by tragedy, some Americans dropped everything to assist in Haiti

'THIS IS WHAT BEING HUMAN IS ALL ABOUT'

by Jocelyn C. Zuckerman



FOR SOME AMERICANS, THE call to go help in Haiti was deeply personal. Four years ago, Muni Tahzib, a pediatrician in Hoboken, N.J., watched as her 3-year-old son, Max, nearly died from an allergic reaction to penicillin. During the six weeks he spent in intensive care, she recalled, "We received an incredible amount of love from absolute strangers."

So when Dr. Tahzib, 40, saw the terrible damage wrought by the 7.0 earthquake that struck Haiti on Jan. 12, she "couldn't just sit there." She called Unicef, the Red Cross, and Doctors Without Borders to volunteer. "Do you have five to 10 years of field experience?" the organizations asked. She didn't. Frustrated, Dr. Tahzib logged on to Facebook.

"My friend & I are putting a medical team together to go to Haiti on Monday," she posted on Wednesday, Jan. 20. "Anyone who wants to join us, please call ASAP!"

Others were responding to something more visceral—a gut punch to the psyche, an instinctive urge to help. That same week, firefighter Nelson Estremera, 31, had gathered his wife and three children around their dining-room table in Jersey City to tell them he wanted to go to Haiti.

"Daddy," his kids said, "they need you there."

The recent earthquake has elicited an enormous outpouring of aid from around the world. By Feb. 10, donations to U.S. organizations alone had exceeded \$713 million, according to Indiana University's Center on Philanthropy. Patrick Rooney, its executive director, attributes the outpouring of altruism in part to the legacies of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina. "Certainly those disasters have raised our empathy."

Americans' financial generosity, especially given the recession, is impressive. But just as amazing are the ad-hoc actions of ordinary citizens like Estremera and Dr. Tahzib, people who dropped everything to board planes and pitch tents in the yards and parking lots of Port-au-Prince and surrounding towns.

Four days after posting her plea on Facebook, Dr. Tahzib had found 17 doctors, nurses, emergency medical technicians, and others to sign on to her impulsive plan. She knew only half of them, like her neighbor, TV graphics designer Barbara Colegrove Bravo, who had booked a flight for the sole purpose of carrying an additional 140 pounds of the medical and humanitarian supplies that had piled up, unbidden, on Dr. Tahzib's front doorstep.

Dr. Tahzib posted a plea on Facebook and found 17 people to go with her.

The group flew to Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic on Jan. 25, spent the night there, and drove across the island to Port-au-Prince, Haiti's capital, in a school bus crammed with medical supplies, flashlights, baby formula, tents, sleeping bags, 200 gallons of water, a diesel generator, and a week's worth of meals. With locals to assist as translators, they shuttled among hospitals, clinics, and orphanages and glimpsed sights like the once-grand National Palace, collapsed now upon itself like an ill-conceived wedding cake, and a primary school with a scribbled sign that read REFUGEE CAMP. PLEASE HELP US. Throughout the city, pedestrians clasped bits of fabric to their faces to stanch the smell of decay.

By the time Dr. Tahzib and her team arrived in Port-au-Prince, firefighters Estremera, Jose Cruz, and Andy Azize were on their third day of sweating among the hundreds of bandaged and amputee patients crammed under the tents serving as a ward outside the overcrowded University Hospital.

"You guys know how to give shots?" an onlooker inquired as one of Estremera's group injected morphine into the arm of a newly paralyzed young Haitian woman. "We do now," he shrugged.

Taking a break from efforts to locate the relatives of some fellow Mormons was Jeremy Fuller, 40, from Chandler, Ariz. Like many American volunteers, he had come in response to a higher

Left to right: Survivors passing the ruins of Port-au-Prince's Sacre Coeur Church; assisted by translators, Dr. Muni Tahzib examines a local resident; Dr. Tina Edraki checks on a patient; Gabriela McAdoo plays with Monley Elize, a boy rescued after eight days beneath the rubble.



calling. He'd also felt moved to help after Hurricane Katrina and had spent two weeks in Mississippi waterproofing damaged homes. Fuller was leaving Haiti soon but will return in a few months. "We know we've got a lot of work to do," he said.

EMERGING FROM A BACK ROOM of the building next to the hospital that housed the nonprofit International Medical Corps, Gabriela McAdoo, a nurse from Palo Alto, Calif., tore open a packet of crackers. She spread them with the peanut butter that completed her MRE, or military meal ready to eat. The sleepy-looking mother of two said she'd finally crashed after going nearly nonstop since she arrived in Haiti the day after the quake. McAdoo, 35, had been tending to the physical and emotional needs of one of the disaster's success stories: Monley Elize, 5, who was rescued after eight days under the rubble that had killed both his parents.

Like everyone else, McAdoo had witnessed her share of horrors. There was the mound of corpses next to the morgue that her group had seen when

they'd arrived, she said, and the patient who showed up with a bone hanging out, maggots in his wound. Two weeks after the initial quake, she was beginning to observe its psychological fallout. "People come in with headaches, stomachaches, backaches," she reported. "They can't breathe; their hands are tingling. That's anxiety." Through it all, the Haitians she'd treated had been remarkably strong. "Their pain tolerance is incredible," she said. "In a way, you have to tell them what it's okay to say, because they've never learned to complain."


On the afternoon of Jan. 28, Dr. Tahzib and part of her group were working at an orphanage in the Petionville neighborhood. They'd ended up there through the direction of Lisa Orloff, 44, a former fashion designer, and Matt Begert, a 25-year veteran of the Marine Corps. The pair represented the World Cares Center, which Orloff founded after 9/11 to facilitate "spontaneous volunteerism." Dr. Tahzib grabbed dirty sheets from the rickety beds and fixed them with duct tape to the floor to create makeshift stations—one with cough medicine and antibiotics, another with infant formula and oatmeal. Then she examined some 150 young patients.

That evening, in a classroom at a school on the outskirts of Port-au-Prince where Dr. Tahzib and her crew had pitched their tents, they welcomed

a new life into the world. Magdalah Womé, a 38-year-old Haitian who'd already buried three children, named her baby Tina Rose—for Dr. Tina Edraki, a California obstetrician-gynecologist, and for Rose Cabot, a New Jersey nurse, who had responded to Dr. Tahzib's Facebook post. The baby's new godparents: Yosafe Murphy, an African-American respiratory therapist, and his wife, Itanna, a Filipino-American physician's assistant, who had traveled from Washington state to lend a hand in that dusty room.

Three weeks after the quake, as Dr. Tahzib and other volunteers started to trickle back to their husbands and wives, sons and daughters, and dogs and cats, many vowed to return. All had been changed by their experiences. Somewhere amid the heat and blood and cries of distress, they said, a sort of autopilot functionality had kicked in, erasing their surface differences along the way. "From now on," McAdoo said, "any type of disaster, I am ready to come help."

One afternoon earlier that week, Angelo Maino, 43, a tattooed firefighter who'd come to Haiti with Estremera, looked on as his brawny buddies effortlessly worked in synch with a goateed Los Angeles doctor they'd only just met.

"I wish my kids could see this," Maino marveled. "This is what being human is all about." 

Read about a 7-year-old who raised \$311,000 for Haiti and other heroes at Parade.com/Haiti

'From now on, any type of disaster, I am ready to come help,' a nurse said.