

My uncle's experience in Haiti

A few weeks ago, my uncle Joe volunteered for helping in Haiti through a NGO. He spent 10 days there, as his job did not allow him to spend more time. I was curious about what he was doing there and what was the situation like, so I asked him. This is what he told me (I have also included some of the pictures he took):

"I flew into Haiti with a team from the Global Volunteer Network. This NGO places volunteers in places where they are needed. As a result of the tragedy in Haiti, over 2500 people signed up with GVN to volunteer their time and skills to Haiti and their people. The purpose of our team was to make an assessment in terms of capacities needed, timings and locations. We were also asked to identify other groups with similar approaches to the relief problem (basically long term presence and empowerment to the locals) suitable for partnership with GVN. Our team consisted of doctors, logisticians, PR, specialists in post trauma situations, psychologists and HIV experts."

"Without going too much into detail, I would say that in the capital roughly 1 in every 5 houses was completely destroyed, 2 were badly damaged, and the other two remain structurally solid with considerable visible cracks. In short, the destruction and the death toll has made Haiti reach rock bottom. However, the real tragedy for me is that they were so close to rock bottom anyway!!! The Haitians remain highly spirited, grouping together several times during the day, singing uplifting songs. I would say they worry about the destruction at night time, when those that have their property standing are still afraid to sleep indoors, and they choose to sleep outside in the street. Those that saw their homes destroyed, sleep and live in 'tent cities' that propped up naturally after the tragedy. During the day, the main concern of Haitians is the poverty, their struggle to find food and water. They are trying to get on with their lives; trying to make a living as best, by whatever means, they can."

"Driving through the city, I saw a little girl, probably 10 or so, who was on top of the rubble that I assume used to be her house. She was cleaning herself, or rather pouring what little water she could spare. I had the feeling she was doing it right in the spot where her bathroom used to be. A few meters away, sitting by the curve, was another girl, about 15 or so. She was covering her face, and seemed to be hiding her 'shame'?"

from us. I thought she felt observed, perhaps judged. What struck me, I think, was the smile that the innocence of the first girl brought to me, contrasted with the sadness in the eyes of the second one.”

“I also remember being on a long steep road. A large amount of water had been dumped at the top of the street, and you could see the adults looking at it with anger because of all that water being wasted. However, 15 meters down the street, little kids started approaching. Some cleaned their hands in the water running down. And another one put the wheels of his bicycle and cleaned it pretty well. He wanted to have shiny wheels!!”

“In front of the presidential palace is a huge open lot. The number of tents there is breathtaking. About 600 families had set their homes there. Open sewage made the smell pretty strong. Anyway, there was a car abandoned in front of the open lot. And I saw how that car had become another 'room' in these people new 'home'. In the same car someone was sleeping inside. On the driver's side view mirror was a person brushing his teeth. Another was urinating on the back wheel. Another combing her hair against the other side view mirror. Others using the hood for something or another...”

“And finally, the thing that shocked me the most.... I drove to the airport at 3 AM to drop off one of our team members who left earlier than me. I knew that people were not sleeping in their homes for fear. But I did not expect to see the number of people I saw sleeping right in the street. With no tent and far enough from their houses in case they would fall. People sleeping in small streets, in major streets, in the main road leading to the airport... They would amass some rubble and set it a few meters in front of them to prevent any cars running over them. We would have to step out of the truck, remove the rubble, drive very carefully, and put some barrier again. They seemed like caterpillars in their sleeping bags, covered head to toe. As we approached with our headlights, we would disturb their sleep, and could see them turning around. It was shocking and eerie. And the next day they would all be singing uplifting tunes. Truly amazing”.

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