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IN VOICE

Horror and Hope as Haiti Rebuilds

By Ashley Villarreal

When the earthquake hit Haiti, Mike Henriquez held his breath. He had family there and had traveled back and forth from New York almost every year up until 1995, in part, because of growing political turmoil. On January 12, the headlines streamed onto the New York Time's Web site classifying the earthquake that hit Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti, which houses over 2 million people, as a 7.0 magnitude quake. This would make it the most devastating disaster in the region in over 200 years.

"When I heard that, I knew it was going to be major," he said. It wasn't until days later that Henriquez learned a portion of his uncle's home had collapsed on top of him, almost breaking his collarbone.

Henriquez, a civil engineer with the New York State Department of Transportation, had dreamed of one day being able to somehow help Haiti, a country that has historically suffered from political corruption, poverty, a lack in health services, and elevated HIV/AIDS cases for decades. "I always wanted to go down there and do something and I never have," he said. "But as soon as this happened, I said this is the time now. I have to step up."

After speaking with his sister, who had ties to several organizations focused on providing aid in the wake of the disaster, Henriquez decided to join with Proyecto America to bring services to remote areas. The organization, which formed in Uruguay around 1995, was about to embark on a five-day journey where over 100 volunteers would travel to set up tents each day to bring clothes, food, and water to some of the reported 1.5 million people who lost their homes.

In addition to joining the mission, Henriquez would also bring \$300 in donations from Transdiaspora Network to provide medical supplies for the camp. Now, more than a month after the quake, Henriquez remembers his experience vividly.

When I asked Henriquez what surprised him upon arriving in Haiti, he laughed ironically, recounting the trip that left him with a lasting impression for which it was hard to have prepared. He tells about a tour his father took him on of the capital, the smell of burned flesh still lingering in the air. "It looks like a war zone," he said. "I don't know how else to describe it, the buildings that collapsed, it looks like it was just bombed."

At the camp, situated in Croix-des-Bouquets, 8 miles from Port-au-Prince, the Proyecto America team set up over 50 tents that housed around 5,000 people. The camp was filled to capacity. Of all the supplies they brought, water was what many of the now-refugee Haitians needed most. "That was the biggest concern," Henriquez said. "They would start fighting when they knew that it was running out, pushing and trying to get ahead of the line."

Henriquez said that for many people at the camp, the story was the same. Their houses had been lost, many of their families had been lost, and now they had nowhere to go. Rarely did Henriquez see entire groups at the camp; the majority who came were mothers with babies, or children who came by themselves. There were hardly any intact families.

When Henriquez reflects on his trip, he strongly believes in the work he's done but he understands why it would be difficult for others to act similarly. Most of the people he knows are second generation Haitians: they grew up here and are not familiar with the culture. He acknowledges that what people see and hear in the media might make them afraid to travel to Haiti. On the other hand, even though things are now worse, he believes they were in the process of getting better.

"My only advice is to say, 'don't forget about Haiti,'" Henriquez said. "The people there still need help, and there's still a lot to be done over there. A lot of money has been collected, but I don't think it's enough yet." It's critical now that Haiti receive the support from the U.S. that it deserves and that help comes from outside to build better infrastructure and provide education so that people can raise their quality of life, he says.

"There really is no health care system there. Haiti basically has a complicated history where the extremely wealthy [control the majority of resources] and the extremely poor make up 95% of the people," Henriquez said. "Hopefully we can build it back up, and I'm hoping the U.S. will take the lead. I don't want them to just give the money to the Haitian government because it will disappear like it has in the past."

Next month, Henriquez plans to travel back to Haiti to visit his family and will most likely team up with another organization to provide aid to those in need. Proyecto America also plans to revisit the country in May for Phase 2 of the rebuilding effort. Visit their website for more information: www.proyectoamerica.net.

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