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# A huge tragedy made startlingly personal

Gerry Straub Tom Roberts | Jan. 27, 2010

Workers walk past the destroyed Sacre Coeur Church in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Jan. 25. (CNS/Eliana Aponte, Reuters)

**Haiti Dispatches No. 4**

**PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti** -- The hills around Port-au-Prince had become, in recent years, the neighborhoods of last resort for rural peasants who came to the city only to find there was little opportunity for work. The neighborhoods stack up upon themselves, concrete, wood and corrugated tin heaped ever higher in a rickety display of humans desperate for shelter, for somewhere to call home.

The earthquake has sent most of these shanty towns crashing down on themselves, and on Monday, filmmaker Gerry Straub made his way through the rubble of some of the neighborhoods with the help of a Haitian guide.

[If the shanty towns had become an iconic image of Haitian poverty, the imposing Villa Manrese, once a Jesuit house until the Duvaliers kicked them out of the country, was another mountainside structure, but it symbolized the prominence of the Catholic presence in the country. High on a hill in the Haute-Turgeau area of Port-au-Prince, the village had a magnificent view of the city and reportedly was a haven of safety and spirituality now run by the order Chierici of Saint Viatore. The villa was said to be a haven for many missionaries from other countries. It had several stories and wide porches that wrapped around the main structure. Today it is a crumpled ruin, and surviving priests and others are caring for about 1,000 people gathered on the property, according to a CNN i-report. Straub did not make it to the out-of-the-way villa, even more isolated than usual because of the quake, but he heard it had collapsed.]

Straub was at the base of one of the hillside towns filming young Haitian medical students, who had returned from studies in the Dominican Republic to help in the emergency, when a young man from the area volunteered to help him make his way through the ruined hillside town.

Straub said he had been to several such towns during his visit in December when he had begun work on a new documentary on the need for compassion. "Climbing through the rubble, we saw desperately poor people struggling to get around. In many places the paths that once existed were blocked. People were carrying what little they had or could scavenge out of the crumbled houses. The stench was overwhelming," Straub said.

"Every once in a while we'd come across a charred area." When he asked his guide about the burn marks, he explained that people in the region -- far from the downtown and any of the relief efforts -- had decided that for the dignity of the dead and the safety of those still alive, they would burn the remains of people.

"In a neighborhood like this you have to ask -- you have to try to imagine -- what that must have been like for people here," said Straub. "One guy said to me, pointing around at the ruins, 'It's all dead. They have no where to go. They really don't know where to go, what to do.'"

The cruel reality is that the number of dead overwhelm any normal and humane means of dealing with the corpses. Straub said he watched corpses placed in heavy plastic bags outside of the Haitian Community Hospital, where he has spent considerable time this past week. At one point someone came to pick up the remains of a deceased relative and overworked hospital personnel were unable to say where the body was. The dead had already been wrapped in heavy plastic and some had been taken away, apparently to one of the mass graves being dug, by a team from the United States who thought they were going to be involved in removal of rubble. One of the bags had been ripped open in a spot where an animal, believed to be a dog, had begun gnawing on a corpse before it was finally taken away.

The impression Straub had of the young man on the mountainside, who refused to take any money for his trouble, was that "he just wanted to show us that there were people here, people he knew, who had died."

Several other times, Straub said, he experienced help from Haitians who refused to take any money. "They had every reason to take it. They have nothing, they're walking the streets, hungry, homeless, but they just wanted to help. And they wouldn't take anything for it. My experience here has really run counter to the notion many have that this is a place on the brink of widespread violence. I've found the people incredibly generous and helpful in their time of need."

The last experience of that kind of generosity came on one of his last days in Port-au-Prince when he asked his driver to get closer to an abandoned pickup truck so he could climb aboard the back of it to a higher wall that surrounded a tent city for refugees that had sprung up. In doing that, a tire of the van Straub was riding in got stuck in a huge pothole. He and others riding with him were unable to get the van unstuck until several Haitians came along and eventually lifted the van high enough that the tire gained traction and was able to move.

Earlier in the day, traveling around the center of the Port-au-Prince with a driver, a translator and Dr. Greg Bellig, an anesthesiologist from Sacramento, Calif., Straub filmed around the remains of the National Cathedral and around another Catholic church, Sacre Coeur, where a large cross remains standing outside, a representative scene that has been filmed repeatedly by news crews.

Straub and Bellig went inside the remaining structure, a church that Straub had visited in December, looking to purchase a rosary made in Haiti.

"It was amazing to see the pews covered with dust. There was a cell phone and a New Testament left behind. The roof is still intact, but most of the walls have fallen in.

"Outside the church, there's a little grotto to Our Lady. I remembered that when I was here in December, there were women back there saying the rosary. And today there were quite a number of women. They looked a little annoyed at me and the camera at first, so I took my rosary out of my pocket and held it up and almost in unison, they all held their rosaries up and smiled."

Across the street from the chapel, Straub said, are the remains of a grammar school. He and Bellig looked into the rubble and the items that make a huge tragedy startlingly personal: notebooks, workbooks, school bags,

papers. And then, most jarring, he and Bellig noticed a tiny foot sticking out, obviously decaying beneath a small pants leg. "So we knew there was the body of a little boy in the rubble, and we began to wonder how many other children were in there and we stopped and said a prayer together.

"The day began with the story of the dog and the corpse, and then to see that little boy. It was really hard, but that's the reality here. You can get lost in huge numbers, you can become numb, and then something happens that reminds you that the numbers are individuals. It's brought down to a personal level."

The young man told Straub that he and some friends have been talking among themselves since the quake ?about the notion of common good and the fact that the line between rich and poor had been erased,? said Straub. ?He said that they understand the corruption within Haiti and what it has done to the country in the past. He told me ?This is a time for Haiti to start all over and do it right. He and his friends are talking now, saying, ?We have to do this right, we can?t do it the same old way.?? At the end of the tour of the city, Straub?s new acquaintance refused to take reimbursement for gas and for his time.

The factory owned by the young man?s family was not affected by the earthquake, and he said he hoped the facility, which manufactures chef?s coats and other types of uniforms for workers, would open again Jan. 25. In the meantime, he said, he has been busy trying to find food for his workers.

On Jan. 23, the banks in Haiti were opened for the first time, Straub said, and they were mobbed with long lines outside. The same situation occurred at Western Union outlets, he said, where people were finally receiving money from outside the country.

Straub observed that on the second and third day of his stay, while being driven around the city, he stopped several times to get out of the car and walked for several blocks, filming the devastation, the crowds, makeshift tent villages and never felt threatened. People, he said, might mob places where they think they can get food. However, he said, he didn?t see any violence, but he could sense the desperation.

The chance meeting occurred after Straub had traveled to a makeshift clinic in a private house in an area called Pacot, closer to the center of the city than the Haitian Community Hospital where he had been staying. The group was made up of Dr. Anna S. Pak of Dallas, a pediatrician; pediatric ER nurse Tiffany Cupp of Chicago; ICU and labor and delivery nurse Anne Marie Colby of Chicago and Paramedic Ronnie Gentry of Chandler, N.C.

The group attended to between 35 and 50 people who had minor injuries and illnesses or bandages that needed changing.

In the 90-minute tour of Port au Prince, Straub said the scene became worse block by block. A heavy stench of death hangs over many areas where collapsed buildings continue to entomb corpses. Rubble still blocks many streets. Straub said some areas that he was familiar with, particularly a park outside a hotel he had previously stayed at, had been turned into a temporary village with people in makeshift shelters. He filmed a soccer field where every square inch had been turned into a tent village.

He said that gruesome discoveries awaited in every block, highlighting the immensity of the destruction and the amount of work ahead just to clean up the human remains and the destroyed property.

Back at the Haitian Community Hospital, Straub was able to sit in on a meeting of medical personnel with a new figure who had arrived to administer the facility. Adding to the chaos of the quake was the fact that so

many doctors and nurses from so many countries kept converging in a place where the need for emergency treatment was nonstop. The talk this day was about setting priorities and beginning to deal with the overload of patients who could be moved but were reluctant to leave the hospital because they were receiving care and, most important, food.

The hospital, said Straub, was also beginning to receive patients who did not have horrible injuries but are ill. Among them, the presumption goes, are people who previously would not have sought treatment but who know that medical attention is now available.

Earlier in the day, said Straub, a truck with food supplies arrived and began unloading goods in an area outside the hospital now crowded with patients and family members. He said a mob scene ensued, so the doctors later discussed new procedures and the need for more troops at the hospital for security purposes.

That evening he stood on a balcony overlooking an open area outside the hospital. In the dark he saw people continuing to carry others into what had become an open triage area. ?The doctors are still working around the clock,? he said. ?The need is relentless, and this is two weeks out. What I am trying to tell you is how widespread this is,? he said. ?It is hard to take in.?

But he was also reminded the day before that life goes on. A baby was born at the hospital around four in the morning.

[Tom Roberts is NCR editor at large. Gerry Straub is a filmmaker, who in December was in Haiti working on a documentary titled "Angels of Compassion: the Luminous Force of Intentional Kindness." He returned to Haiti Jan. 21 for more filming. While there, he filed reports for NCR by phone.]

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For more information on the foundation Straub created, The San Damiano Foundation in Burbank, Calif., and to read about and order his films, please see www.sandamianofoundation.org [7].

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