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Haiti first person: adoption

Judy Gross | Feb. 2, 2010

Monica and Michael Simonsen with Stanley Hermane

One family's story

When NCR reached Monica and Michael Simonsen at their home in Baltimore, the sounds of a happy baby could be heard in the background. The sounds came from Stanley Hermane, 21 months old, who survived the Jan. 12 earthquake in Haiti and is finally in the arms of his adoptive parents.

The couple had gone through the long process to adopt Stanley, working through A Love Beyond Borders, a registered Colorado adoption agency, and were awaiting final clearance when the quake struck. Michael managed to get a seat on a charter flight when they heard the U.S. Dept. of Homeland Security was granting "humanitarian paroles" to move orphans out of the Haiti. In the meantime, Monica traveled to Ft. Lauderdale with other families to wait for the children.

The process began to snarl when, as Monica says, "Groups who were helping us in Florida began to pull out due to political pressure. Her husband arrived in Port-au-Prince to more complications. Forced to sleep in tent cities at the airport, he and the others trying to get the children out finally made it to the U.S. Embassy where they were turned away without explanation.

Monica called the State Department and the U.S. Embassy and relayed the message Michael to return on Sunday to the Embassy. When they did, they were told only seven of the dozen orphans would be released. "There seems to be a disconnect between Homeland Security and the American Embassy in processing the necessary paperwork," Monica said, though she added, "I know they are working as hard as they can."

Than just when all appeared to be in order, another delay: Haitian President Rene Garcia Preval announced he would personally review every file before the children could leave.

Back in Florida, a last minute announcement came alerting the 12 waiting families that the children were not arriving in Ft. Lauderdale but Orlando. The group drove frantically the 80 miles to Orlando to meet the flight.

"There were times I thought it wasn't going to happen and I didn't really believe it until we were in our own

home," Monica said. She criticized the lack of coordination between government entities and aid organizations. "The government should have anticipated and have a systematic plan to deal with this kind of disaster. As it was, everyone fended for themselves."

Her sentiment is echoed by John Cherry, Florida Division of Emergency Management spokesperson. "I think everyone is very well intentioned. The State Department and US AID should be in charge, but it's not working," he said.

"We can only support what we know and we keep getting blindsided," he said.

Even with the glitches in getting Stanley safely out of Haiti, Monica says she and her husband plan to adopt another one so there will be a sibling who looks like Stanley in their home.

She urges others who "know and love the country" to begin the adoption process through a reputable adoption agency, because those parents are "uniquely qualified" to celebrate the culture of Haiti through an adopted child.

[Judy Gross writes from Tallahassee, Fla.]

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