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Ex-Playboy model is "Mama" to Haiti's poor children

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By Jim Loney

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (Reuters) - When former centerfold Susie Krabacher cradles a crippled child in the orphanage she founded in Haiti, the Playboy mansion, a life of drugs and modeling and the heartache of an abused childhood seem far away.

"That was another lifetime. This is what I was put here to do."

Surrounded by the smiling faces of dozens of abandoned, handicapped and ailing children in a modest compound of white buildings on a rutted, rocky road north of the Haitian capital, Krabacher seems strangely in her element.

A lean and striking blond American of 42 who stands out in a predominantly black nation, Haiti's "Mama Blanche" speaks easily about the tough road that took her from years of abuse at the hands of a relative to 1983 Playboy centerfold to the trash-filled streets of the poorest country in the Americas.

"I just promised to God when I was a child that if he would help me not get killed, if I could survive, I was going to help kids."

Spurred by this promise, she was ready to build her dream in Mongolia in 1994, but an acquaintance asked her why she would go so far away when troubled Haiti, so near, needed so much.

"I said, 'I didn't know Tahiti was poor.' And he said, 'no, no, Haiti.' I'd never heard of Haiti."

Krabacher quickly arranged a trip and spent her first night in Cite Soleil, a sprawling seaside shantytown in the capital that is home to some of Haiti's poorest and has recently been the site of gunbattles between U.N. peacekeepers and gangs.

In 12 years in a violent and politically unruly nation, Krabacher says she has negotiated with gang leaders, turned away bribe-seeking bureaucrats and received death threats. She hopes Tuesday's election can bring a semblance of stability.

ABANDONED CHILDREN

Krabacher has seen the worst of Haiti. Her kids, half of whom are severely handicapped or terminally ill, are gathered from the streets or found in pig pens, toilets and cages.

One year-old child was found in a sewage canal. When rescuers pulled him out, Krabacher said, they found cinder blocks tied to his shattered legs.

That child was a success story. He was adopted and lives in Wales. But she has seen hundreds of the children succumb.

"Going to the morgue is the worst. In every one of their little caskets we put a little note ... and in that note it says 'in

this world, you were loved."

At her walled Mercy House, Mickey Mouse and other cartoon characters are painted on the small buildings, which contain neat rows of bunk beds, a kitchen and a medical room, all secured by an armed guard.

On a recent day, Krabacher carefully lifted tiny Carol from a bed. She had feared the 5-year-old, who weighs about 12 pounds (5.5 kg), wouldn't make it through the night.

Carol's red dress couldn't hide her twisted legs. Her body was rigid. "She had a cleft palate and the anesthesia went wrong during the operation. She suffered brain damage," Krabacher said, laying the child down gently.

"She really loves the children and they love her. She is even more than what people say about her," said Turenne Raquens, who just joined the orphanage as a director.

The Mercy & Sharing Foundation Krabacher started has three orphanages, six schools, a hospital and six feeding programs in Haiti. The orphanages are home to 120 kids and the charity feeds 3,300 a day on a donated annual budget of \$400,000 and \$700,000 in gifts of food, diapers and supplies.

Krabacher, who normally spends half her time in Haiti, says she does not miss the restaurants, cappuccino and fancy clothes of her former life and expects to die in Haiti -- but "hopefully not by a bullet," she says with a smile.

"I know that when I die I will go to heaven, and by the time I die I think there will be a thousand of my kids up there. And they, I know, are talking about me. I'm usually the last person they see when they die."

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