

Ex-centerfold is savior to Haitian kids

New book recounts journey from Hef's mansion to slums of Port-au-Prince

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PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti - Glassy-eyed and so thin his bones protrude through his skin, a newborn infant named only Rony stares up at a dirty ceiling hour after hour, frozen in his crib because of a softball-sized tumor on the back of his neck.

Then an hourglass-shaped, platinum-haired woman flashing a megawatt smile and wearing diamond earrings and designer blue jeans leans over his crib in the steamy hospital ward, locks her long arms around the child and gently pulls him toward her.

"They don't hold the children much here," says Susie Scott Krabacher, a former Playboy centerfold who over the last 15 years has become an unlikely patron savior for scores of abandoned Haitian babies.

Krabacher, 43, founded the Mercy and Sharing Foundation, an Aspen, Colo.-based charity that has provided shelter, schooling and health care to thousands of children from the poorest slums of this troubled Caribbean nation. The charity, funded mostly through private donors, runs six schools, three orphanages, an abandoned-baby ward and a cervical cancer screening center.

"If it wasn't for her, all of those kids would be dead today," said Bob Lataillade, who runs Mercy and Sharing's main orphanage in Port-au-Prince.

Krabacher chronicles her unusual journey — from partying in Hugh Hefner's mansion to setting up Haiti's first hospital ward for abandoned babies — in a memoir to be released in October titled "Angels of a Lower Flight" (Simon & Schuster).

The book, which is expected to be made into a film, details Krabacher's childhood growing up poor in Alabama and her wilder days at Playboy, where she had a 10-year career, including a May 1983 centerfold spread.

With her long blonde locks and statuesque figure, Krabacher cuts an odd figure in the streets of Haiti's gritty capital. She has been known to waltz into the most dangerous slums wearing platform boots and flowing skirts to ask tattooed gang leaders to allow her charity work to proceed without being robbed.



Ariana Cubillos / ASSOCIATED PRESS

Susie Scott Krabacher holds an abandoned baby at the General Hospital in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, on July 31. Krabacher, 43, a former Playboy centerfold, founded the Mercy and Sharing Foundation, an Aspen, Colorado-based charity that has provided shelter, schooling and health care to thousands of children from the poorest slums of this troubled Caribbean nation.

On her first visit to the country in 1994, Krabacher visited Port-au-Prince's bleak General Hospital and was shocked to find cores of unwanted babies left abandoned and without food in their cribs, including one who had died without anyone noticing.

"There were rats the size of Chihuahuas," Krabacher, who lives in Aspen but visits Haiti several times a year, told The Associated Press during a recent trip here. "They would run all over the place and bite the children. It was horrible."

Krabacher eventually persuaded hospital officials to allow her and her husband, Joe, to pay to fix up the ward, which today cares for about 20 children.

Like little Rony, many were left outside the hospital entrance, often frail and barely clinging to life.

"He's going to suffer his entire life. But at least we can give him some humanity so he doesn't have to die in utter misery," Krabacher says, gently swaying Rony in her arms.

A couple of weeks later, Rony died. He was 3 months old.

Krabacher has had to overcome setbacks in her mission to help Haiti's neediest.

When the abandoned baby ward first opened, people stole the ceiling fans, the refrigerator and baby mattresses.

After rebels forced President Jean-Bertrand Aristide from power in 2004, Krabacher flew into the chaotic capital and found that looters had broken into a food warehouse and stolen the orphanage's supply of rice, beans and milk.

For her work, Krabacher was made an honorary Haitian citizen and in 2004 was invited to Buckingham Palace to receive the Rose Award, presented by the foundation established to further Princess Diana's commitment to the poor.