

Woody Creeker sends 100 tons of food to Haiti

by **Curtis Wackerle**, Aspen Daily News Staff Writer

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Susan Krabacher holds a malnourished Haitian child. Krabacher's organization, Mercy and Sharing, raises money to help feed the Needy in Haiti.

As the hungry rioted in the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince last week, protesting sharply escalating food prices, Woody Creek resident Susan Krabacher found it easy to round up 100 tons of food aid for the impoverished nation.

Last week's unrest was some of the worst that has occurred in the 14 years she has run Mercy and Sharing, an organization dedicated to feeding, caring for and educating children in the Western Hemisphere's poorest nation. Although Krabacher was safe in Colorado, she grew accustomed to hearing gunshots and explosions in the background when talking on the phone with staff members in Haiti. It's hard to imagine the strife on the western third of the island of Hispaniola, about 500 miles from Miami.

"A lot of the kids (in Mercy and Sharing's orphanage) are terminally ill," Krabacher said. "They can't run and hide. They have to lay there and listen to that."

The situation in Haiti appears to be calming after a traumatic episode. Rioters took to the streets of Port-au-Prince, protesting drastic increases in the price of food during the past year. Following the ouster of Prime Minister Jacques-Edouard Alexis last Friday, the Haitian government announced new subsidies that would cut the cost of a pound of rice from \$1.01 to \$0.86. But that same pound of rice cost \$0.24 per pound two years ago, according to Stefan Radelich, director of Feed The Hungry, a charity that works with Krabacher.

The rising oil prices, climate crises and the conversion of food crops into biofuel have led to a 40 percent jump in world food prices that has hit Haiti especially hard, because the 98 percent deforested nation must import almost all of its food.

Krabacher, a Playboy centerfold in 1984, scratches her head when she hears boastful claims that Brazil is sending 14 tons of food to alleviate the crisis, or the announcement from Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez that his oil-rich nation will send 364 tons of food.

"If a little tiny Aspen-based organization can send 100 tons of food at the snap of a finger, why is there a food crisis in Haiti?" Krabacher asked. "There is no reason for people to starve if we have the resources."

Well, maybe not quite at the snap of a finger.

Krabacher has built Mercy and Sharing through 14 years into an organization that serves more than 3,300 women and children with a clinic, orphanage and school in an impoverished neighborhood in the Haitian capital. In Haiti, which consistently ranks in the top five or 10 most corrupt nations in the world, credibility can be the most valuable asset.

"We can show you where every five-pound bag of food has gone for the last five years," Krabacher said. Organizations donating the food "want to know that it is not being sold by gangs in downtown Port-au-Prince."

In the last two years, Mercy and Sharing has reportedly donated 230 tons, or \$3.31 million in food aid, and \$2.35 million in financial aid to Haiti.

Seconds wanted

The United States is home to scores of organizations whose sole mission is to collect and ship food to hungry parts of the world. The food is generally donated by food producers, which give away "seconds," or food that has a minor defect preventing its sale, but is still good enough to eat. For example, an assembly line at a soup plant might mistakenly add onion powder to a batch of soup that is not intended to contain onion, so the batch is donated. Additionally, food producers often set aside portions of raw staples, such as rice and corn, to be donated.

Feed The Hungry collects the seconds and the donations, stores them in one of its three U.S. warehouses and distributes them around the world. Radelich, director of the faith-based nonprofit, first heard of Krabacher when she was interviewed on a radio program on a broadcast network connected to Feed The Hungry. Krabacher was at the time promoting her book "Angels of a Lower Flight: One Woman's Mission to Save a Country . . . One Child at a Time."

Radelich agreed to supply Krabacher with food, and went down to Haiti in March to get a first-hand look at Mercy and Sharing's efforts before becoming more deeply involved with the group.

"Everything checked out," Radelich said, praising Krabacher and the dedication of the staff in Haiti.

Troubled Country

Haiti's situation is akin to "West African peace sandwiched in between 15 years of civil war," Radelich said.

The Haitian people have a troubled history and suffer many disadvantages. The natives of Hispaniola — the island shared by Haiti and the Dominican Republic — were wiped out within 25 years of the arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1492, and Haiti, the western third of the island, which was given to France in 1697, obtained its independence in 1804 after a violent slave uprising.

Deforestation is seen as a major cause of the current strife there, as what little is left of Haiti's once-lush forests are chopped down by peasants to be sold as fuel, because electricity for heating and cooking is not available or too expensive. The deforestation leads to erosion, which undermines what little land in the mountainous country is suitable for agriculture.

"No one seems to have a solution for an island that doesn't have soil," Krabacher noted.

And with HIV/AIDS present in more than 5 percent of the population and 80 percent living on \$2 per day or less, life expectancy in Haiti is shorter than 58 years.

"Another problem is the lack of ability to see into the future," said Krabacher, adding that an attitude of "you might not make it until tomorrow" is common.

Krabacher focuses her efforts on rescuing infants from the abandoned baby unit in the main Port-au-Prince hospital. A majority of the abandoned children are handicapped.

Call to Aspen

Krabacher is somewhat critical of the philanthropic climate in Aspen. "It really is time to make a community plea," she said.

Krabacher pointed out that Aspen is great at giving to the arts, but when she held a lecture and slide show about Haiti recently in the valley, about 70 people "came in, cried and left," without making any substantial donations.

"It's great to support the arts," Krabacher said "But on Monday I was trying to find a coffin for an 18-month-old infant. This is what we deal with — buying coffins for infants."

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