

Haiti puts model's past in perspective

By Bruce Finley
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The first of her daily phone calls from Haiti reaches Susie Krabacher in Aspen: The abandoned baby with a bloated head died.

And a 2-year-old, found outside one of her orphanages, was taken in.

And Krabacher is the target of a lawsuit, for \$567,000, in one of poverty-stricken Haiti's notoriously corrupt courts.

Such are the troubles she encounters regularly in her charity campaign to shelter, heal and school tens of thousands of Haiti's neediest children.

Her new book, "Angels of a Lower Flight," tells of Krabacher's own childhood growing up poor and sexually abused in Alabama. After a decade posing and partying for Playboy, her work in Haiti through her Mercy and Sharing Foundation put her problems in perspective, she said.

"I've been through hell. It's certainly nothing compared to what these children go through. ... I never could say I was left to die. I was hurt, but never left to die."

The 43-year-old shuttles back and forth about five times a year from her Aspen home to oversee six schools, three orphanages, an abandoned-baby ward in a government hospital and a cancer-screening center in Haiti - a volatile Maryland-sized, former French colony of 8 million that sits southeast of Florida and east of Cuba. Despite Haiti's proximity to the United States, it is the site of some of the planet's worst suffering.

An estimated 40 percent of Haitians lack access to safe water, and many mothers die in childbirth. United Nations peacekeepers, a fixture in recent years, try to contain a lawlessness in which 60 U.S. citizens were reported kidnapped last year. Gangs rule the slums where Krabacher - a lean, blond woman who often wears high-heeled shoes - has worked for 13 years. Shootings are rampant.

U.S. officials estimate 8 percent of the cocaine that enters American cities moves through Haiti. Aid of about \$200 million a year aims at boosting good governance.

Yet what's happening on the streets can best be described as "a slow, subtle genocide of imperfectly formed children," Krabacher said.

"If you think there's anything wrong in your life, I want you to come to Haiti. You will not consider your problems nearly as devastating. I promise you," she said.

She shrugged off the lawsuit - saying it was filed by a former employee who stole a milk shipment from her - as more of the same from a Haitian judiciary that U.S. officials call weak.

She was pronounced an honorary citizen of Haiti in 2004. That award "hasn't brought me any favor," she said. "I've always been ostracized."

Three years ago, her food warehouse burned to the ground. Police have held her at gunpoint, she said.

British authorities in 2004 gave her the Rose Award, from the People's Princess Charitable Foundation, set up to continue Princess Diana's work for the poor.

After the daily phone call, Krabacher arranged a funeral for the 3-month-old girl.

A few days ago, she'd lined up a neurosurgeon to operate on her head and save her.

"I only got to hold her once."

Bruce Finley: 303-954-1700 or bfinley@denverpost.com



Susie Krabacher is helping to shelter, heal and school tens of thousands of Haiti's children. As a child, she was sexually abused, and later modeled and partied for Playboy. (Post / Brian Brainerd)