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Why Susie Krabacher Sold the Sushi Bar To Buy an Orphanage

Former Playmate Was Moved

By Plight of Kids in Haiti;
'Nobody Ever Helped Me'

By JOSÉ DE CÓRDOBA

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti -- Last week, as gunmen murdered people on the streets and foreigners scrambled to get out of the country, Susie Scott Krabacher flew in from Aspen, Colo.

Negotiating barricades of burning tires in her platform boots and ankle-length white skirt, she headed straight for a summit meeting with powerful gang leaders in the meanest slum in the poorest country in the Americas.

Sitting in the cavernous gloom of a church, Mrs. Krabacher, 40 years old and Playboy's Miss May of 1983, worked her charm on a taciturn, heavysset gang leader known only by his first name, Amaral. Peering into his eyes, and lightly touching his knee, Mrs. Krabacher told Amaral that she has great plans for his sector of this squalid slum called Cité Soleil -- a basketball court, a free clinic and a better school -- but only if Haiti's political chaos subsides.

"We are worried what will happen if this country goes crazy," Mrs. Krabacher told Amaral.

Haiti went crazy long before [President Jean-Bertrand Aristide resigned](#)¹ and fled into exile Sunday. Describing herself as the "Playboy Playmate Mother Teresa of Haiti," Mrs. Krabacher has plunged into the chaos to become an important provider of medical care and education. In the past decade, she has taken charge of the abandoned children's unit of Haiti's main hospital and set up a system of six schools and three orphanages. She provides education for nearly 2,000 kids, and care for 150 orphans, about 60 of whom are severely handicapped or terminally ill.

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**Susie Scott
Krabacher**

Last week, as armed rebels marched toward the capital vowing to overthrow President Aristide, Mrs. Krabacher's route to Cité Soleil was littered with the carcasses of stripped and burned automobiles. Merchant women squatted selling sticks of sugar cane, ends sharpened to points, next to paper bags of charcoal. A cloud of foul smoke rose from mounds of smoldering garbage. Pigs rooted through piles of trash and waded through open sewers filled with slime the bright green color of antifreeze. The body of a man recently killed was sprawled in the road. Next to the corpse, hard men glared at passersby.

One night last week, a dozen gunmen tried to break into one of the nearby schools Mrs. Krabacher runs. The next day, a mob looted a warehouse where Mrs. Krabacher keeps supplies, stealing \$7,000 of donated rice, beans, wheelchairs and milk. "I didn't need to see this," she said sadly outside the wrecked warehouse. Undaunted, the day after the looting, Mrs. Krabacher scoured the waterfront to buy looted rice for the children in her orphanage, ultimately scoring 11 bags weighing 120 pounds each.

At the hospital children's unit she runs, pillows and medicines are regularly stolen. Thieves even got the unit's first oven and refrigerator, and broke up a cabinet for the wood. Last week, an employee fired for stealing from one of the orphanages paid a gang leader to show up with half a dozen armed men threatening to kill everybody inside if the employee wasn't reinstated. "You need strength and faith to do this in Haiti," said Stanley Joseph, Mrs. Krabacher's right-hand man. "The country is made to stop you."

To forestall such troubles, Mrs. Krabacher is careful to meet with local gang leaders such as Amaral. Last week, Amaral, who won't give his last name, promised to support her projects in exchange for a promise of medical help for a friend of his who obligingly lifted his T-shirt at Amaral's command to reveal big scars on his belly from bullet wounds. "Do you mind if we pick him up and take him to a doctor outside?" Mrs. Krabacher asked. "No one will want to come and examine him here."

Mrs. Krabacher reached Cité Soleil by a circuitous route. At 18, she was living in Hugh Hefner's Playboy mansion in Beverly Hills. Among her beaux, she says, were crooner Julio Iglesias and rocker Rod Stewart. She moved to Aspen five years later and lives there still with her husband, corporate and real-estate lawyer Joseph Krabacher, 50. For a time, she was a partner in a sushi bar and an antique store.

Ten years ago, after seeing a television documentary, she set out to help orphans in Mongolia. But a friend convinced her that the needs were greater in nearby Haiti. She flew to Port-au-Prince instead. At the airport, she recalls, she asked a taxi driver to take her to where "the poor people are." He dropped her at this seaside shantytown and quickly drove away.

Perched on high heels, she walked into the fetid slum of tiny airless tin shacks. A family of 17 took her in for the night.

"It changed my life. It rocked my world," she says. "I knew why I had been born that day." She says she has always been a Christian but that she completely committed herself to Christ when she started working in Haiti.

She says that as a young girl growing up in a small Alabama town, she was sexually abused. "In each of the kids, when they first come to me, I see the exact look I had in my own eyes when I would crawl up and look in the mirror of the vanity in the bathroom," she says. "I looked so old and raggedy, and nobody ever helped me."

Within three days of arriving in Haiti the first time, she had negotiated for a piece of land and started the construction of a health-care center and food kitchen. Built in 1994 at a cost of \$13,000, the building, which stands a few yards down a narrow alleyway from the tin shack where she first stayed in Cité Soleil, now doubles as a school, the first of six she has founded in Haiti. Last week, it was jammed with smiling kids in clean blue uniforms.

Soon after, Mrs. Krabacher started visiting the abandoned children's unit at Port-au-Prince's main hospital, a warren of colonial buildings built by the American Red Cross in 1922. In 1995, she negotiated an agreement to run the unit for the hospital. As part of the deal, the hospital insisted that she place the children who survived somewhere else.

Mrs. Krabacher, who had already sold her interest in her Aspen sushi bar to fund her project, took on a second mortgage on her Aspen house, paying \$110,000 to buy a property she converted into an orphanage.

Two years later, she paid \$250,000 to buy an abandoned orphanage and school. At that site, she now runs a school, an orphanage for disabled and terminally ill children and a second orphanage for normal children. Many of the children from the abandoned children's unit she still runs at the hospital end up at the orphanage and school.

For her efforts, Mrs. Krabacher has been named an honorary Haitian citizen. American Airlines, which once lent one of its jets to fly some 39,000 pounds of rice, beans and milk to Haiti for her foundation, flies her free of charge. Mrs. Krabacher is also well known in Washington among lawmakers involved with Haiti. Burton Wides, senior counsel to Rep. John Conyers, the Michigan Democrat and senior member of the Black Caucus, says his boss "is terribly

impressed by her dedication, forcefulness and willingness to do everything needed to help save these kids."

Last week, going from cot to cot, Mrs. Krabacher hugged and held the dozen children in the unit. Some were matchstick thin. Others had the swollen heads typical of hydrocephalus.

Mrs. Krabacher spends about three weeks in Haiti every two months. Last year, her husband kicked in about \$110,000 for the foundation's total budget of \$340,000, and she raised the rest. "Neither of us wanted kids," she says. "Now we have 2,000, and no stretch marks to show for it."