

Applause for woman's helping hand to Haiti's kids

By Jenny Deam
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It's not exactly a phone message one gets every day: Kensington Palace on the line. A friend of the late Princess Diana wants to chat.

When Susie Krabacher's assistant ran to her kitchen in Aspen last month to say London was calling, shock soon gave way to horror:

"And you've got them on hold?"

Saturday night in London, Krabacher, who for the past 11 years has devoted her life to helping orphaned and dying children in Haiti, will be one of four people honored for extraordinary humanitarian efforts.

She will receive the Rose Award, presented by the People's Princess Foundation. The foundation was established by Princess Diana's son Prince William to further his mother's commitment to help the needy.

"I first thought someone was playing a mean joke on me," Krabacher, 40, said in a phone interview Thursday. "But it's real. I'm looking out my hotel window, and I'm across from Kensington Palace right now."

No amount of jet lag can mask the Cinderella-going-to-the-ball voice. The event will be fairy-tale lavish, with tickets fetching anywhere from \$5,000 to \$35,000 each. Music will be provided by the London Symphony Orchestra.

And then there's that little matter of what to wear.



Mercy and Sharing Foundation

Susie Krabacher, surrounded by children in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, oversees three orphanages, six schools and a library in the country.

"My glamour days ended when I started sleeping in lean-tos," she joked. "I haven't owned a ball gown since my Playboy days." (She borrowed a dress from a friend in Aspen.)

Krabacher, stunning with flowing blond hair and signature high heels, was once a Playboy centerfold. That was when she was 17-year-old Susie Scott and lied about her age so she could become Miss May 1983.

But it was her first, terrifying trip into the depths of Haiti's poverty in 1994 that pointed her toward a different life path.

She and her husband, Aspen attorney Joe Kra-

bacher, who have no children of their own, started the Mercy and Sharing Foundation, using mostly their own money.

The foundation, which runs three orphanages, six schools and a library, plans to open a hospital for women and children next month. Krabacher visits Haiti every other month to oversee operations. Most of the rest of her time is spent crisscrossing this country, seeking donations.

Most recently, the staff has been scrambling in the wake of Hurricane Jeanne, which killed more than 1,500 people and left 200,000 homeless in Haiti.

"People are still in shock," she said. "There are children who saw their mothers washed away. They only survived because someone reached out and grabbed them by their hair or an arm."

In Haiti, a nation of 8 million, the life expectancy is 52, and more than one in 10 children die before reaching age 5.

Even so, said Krabacher, "we have never been confronted with the issues we are facing now" in the aftermath of Jeanne.

"We've lost thousands of children," she says of her decade of work in Haiti. But, she adds, "we've also saved thousands."

"It's so freeing to know, without any doubt, why I was born."

For more information about the Mercy and Sharing Foundation, go to www.haitichildren.com.