

A personal awakening in Haiti

By Kathleen Carlson

For as long as I can remember, I've felt that I was meant to ease other people's pain. Yet somewhere along the line, I grew up, got a job and forgot.

At the age of 24, I had the good fortune to reawaken to my calling.

I was a staff writer for the Aspen Daily News when my friend and fellow photographer, Stef Deutsch, and I traded the local mud season for a few days in a Third World country. Our mission was to reveal the dismal conditions that Aspen resident Susie Krabacher battles to help the poor and abandoned children of Haiti.

The very first day changed my life.

At the Mercy House Orphanage, which was then home to about 30 handicapped and terminally ill children, I met a young boy named Lee who latched onto me and became my companion for the afternoon.

There are a few split seconds in my life that I'll never forget, and this was one of them. As we pulled away, I turned around moments before the Mercy House was out of view. I saw little Lee banging his hand on the balcony railing, crying.

Silence permeated the van as we drove away, pondering the suffering we had witnessed. I tilted my hat down, trying to hide tears that I couldn't hold back.



Kathleen Carlson. Aspen Times photo/Devon Meyers.

use that notion to see heroes in all of us, to recognize the positive in anyone, regardless of the other elements that shape their character.

I believe the greatest heroes are the most compassionate toward others. I see compassion as a great act — a moment when nothing else matters but

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I scarcely felt like a hard-nosed reporter.

At that point I began to distance myself from my journalistic goals and began a quest for my own life of service. Little did I imagine that I would become a volunteer for the same woman who started with nothing and now has nearly 2,000 Haitian children in her care.

After my first journey to Haiti, I left Aspen searching for similar nonprofit work that the Mercy and Sharing Foundation provides. I didn't find a vocation as fulfilling or rewarding as my work today with Mercy and Sharing, but I learned an important lesson along the way.

I met a man who espoused the belief that prophecy has nothing to do with predicting the future. He showed me that prophecy for him is a way of life — of mending the present, healing the wounds, and fostering a future of human connectedness.

His mission had a profound affect on me, and my desires for a life of service shifted. I no longer want giving or sacrifice to be my driving force. I want to work outside myself and somehow help lift people toward peace.

Having experienced life in Haiti, I know I may never attain that goal, but, in trying, I pray I am able to bring people together, offer hope, love and perhaps a little peace.

When I was a child I idolized people whom I respected; I thought they could do no wrong. I was constantly crushed when my idols proved to be mere humans. Only as an adult did I realize that heroes have human flaws. At first it was a bittersweet understanding. Now I

the loving connections between people.

During the seven months that I've been a volunteer for Mercy and Sharing, I've seen compassion in the most unlikely places. I've seen an enormous thug hold a tiny bottle in the palm of his hand, tenderly feeding a dying baby. I didn't think much about his criminal past during that moment. I've seen toddlers so emaciated from starvation that, though their bodies may grow long, their thighs never become wider than a coffee cup. Despite their struggle to survive, they bravely flicker their eyes toward me as I hold them.

Haiti is one of the most corrupt countries in the world and the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. People live in devastating conditions. The poverty seems insurmountable and the environmental degradation is shocking.

Despite all that, a woman from Aspen has faced numerous obstacles to brighten the existence of thousands in Haiti. Other organizations feed and clothe the destitute and sick Haitian children, but there are few like Mercy and Sharing that take the holistic approach of raising the child through education, nourishment, and moral and spiritual leadership.

Susie Krabacher doesn't want to just see these children beat death, she wants to see them flourish and live a fulfilling life, one that hopefully includes giving back to their brothers and sisters, their communities, and restoring their country. So far, she's quite a success and a true hero.

Kathleen Carlson is the U.S. director of the Mercy and Sharing Foundation.

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The foundation has also started or taken over six schools that provide education up to the sixth grade. The foundation's largest school has about 850 children, though the schools typically number between 200 and 250 students. One of those schools provides hope for 100 students in Cite Soleil, one of the most depressed slums outside Port-au-Prince.

In addition to the finest education in Haiti, the students at all schools receive one meal per day and clean water — virtual luxuries in Haiti. Mercy and Sharing Foundation provides books and uniforms, although students can no longer wear their uniforms home because parents will often sell the clothing to raise cash.

Joe admits the foundation has grown larger than he ever imagined. "Once you take the kids you can never turn back," he said.

And he remains confident it will continue to flourish. "If God is with you, who can be against you?" he asked.

The foundation's annual operating

tors, nurses, administrators and others working at the foundation's nine orphanages and schools. Only natives are hired. The jobs are coveted, Susie said, because they include health-care benefits.

Not a glamor cause

Celebrity status and beauty opens doors for 40-year-old Susie Krabacher, but raising funds for the foundation isn't easy.

Initially, Krabacher said, wealthy potential donors would meet with her because, knowing she was a former Playboy model, they wanted to give her "the good ol' head-to-toe" look. More often than not, those meetings didn't yield contributions. None of the contacts she made in the Playboy mansion, including Hefner, has helped.

"The celebrity gifts have not come at all, at least partially because Haiti is black children in a country where people are known for killing each other," she said.

She recalled pulling at the heart strings of a group in Aspen with a presentation that showed the plight of chil-



Susie Krabacher comforts a young child with spina bifida. Deformities and retardation are common in Haiti, due to pervasive poverty, malnutrition and lack of health care. Photo courtesy Mercy and Sharing Foundation.

"I wanted to help kids in pain. I had never seen so much pain."

- Susie Krabacher

budget is about \$320,000. The Krabachers provide about one-third of that amount from their own pockets. Susie devotes her time in the United States to raising funds and supplies.

To keep the operating budget under control, many goods must be donated. For example, the foundation goes through 6,000 diapers each month, the cost of which would be prohibitive. So Susie works with companies to get them donated.

Joe noted that the funds raised by the foundation stretch a long way in impoverished Haiti. Land prices are surprisingly high, but construction is cheap and wages are low. The foundation's first school cost \$14,000 to build, he said.

All cash contributions to Mercy and Sharing go directly to the children. All administrative costs are paid by the Krabachers, Susie said, which makes the foundation unique. Kids from the orphanages are put up for adoption, but the foundation doesn't profit from the adoptions.

There are 152 Haitian teachers, doc-

dren in Haiti. A well-known local man (who she refused to name) followed her presentation, urging the group to help him provide golf clubs for disadvantaged local youth. The group contributed to the golf project, Krabacher said.

She can only laugh at the story now.

After more than a decade of hard work, tangible results and favorable coverage in publications from the Wall Street Journal to People magazine, the foundation is gaining clout and funding.

"People have come to not focus so much on the fact that I was a centerfold for Playboy," Krabacher said.

The small contributions the organization receives are as meaningful to the Krabachers as the big gifts. A local child told Susie recently that her mom cleaned an extra house so she could donate to the Mercy and Sharing Foundation.

While the Krabachers keep seeking a deep-pocketed individual or organization to help start an endowment fund, they have also launched a new fund-raising

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