

Special Edition Juicy Bits

Susan's Story: A Life Changing Trip to Haiti

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Rattled nerves and obsessive thoughts kept her up for nights before the trip. Tears filled her bright eyes at the mere thought of leaving her husband and two young children, Josie and Logan, for a week-long journey to earthquake-ravaged Haiti.

As soon as the first images from Port-au-Prince were aired on television in January, Susan Leitner, M.D. knew she wanted to help. But whether she could really go through with it was another story. She wondered whether her experience as a private primary care pediatrician-- where most days involve talking to parents about wellness, nutrition and safety-- would be enough to guide her when conversations turned to infection and disease not typically seen in the U.S. The children coming to see her would not be in for an earache or cold, but coming in with severe burns, broken bones, lost limbs— and lost hope.

Preparation for the trip began with research. She read up on trauma cases, resuscitation, rare disorders. She got vaccinated for tetanus, meningitis, typhoid fever and Hepatitis A and took anti-malaria pills. She spoke at length to Pediatric Associates colleague Robert Perello, M.D., and other physician friends from the University of Miami's Project Medishare program about their recent medical trips to Haiti. But in the end, it was one simple approving nod and warm smile from her husband, Dan, while standing together at 4 a.m. on an April morning at Miami International Airport that got her on the plane. "Go," he said.



"You can't imagine how bad it is until you see it. The conditions are so much worse than I expected. It just seemed like bombs had exploded everywhere. People there are very stoic. There is this learned helplessness. They travel for days just to get to the hospital and some sit outside its walls and wait for hours to be seen," she said. "It was over 100 degrees every day. We could take showers for 30 seconds at a time and because of all the bugs, I had to then lather my body with insect repellent. But I was

constantly reminded of what Dr. Perello had told me - this was just an inconvenience for me, but for the Haitian people, this was their daily life."



Soon after arriving, Dr. Leitner's own inner strength, medical expertise and strong instincts quickly propelled her away from fearing into taking action. She quickly felt purposeful, focused and forever transformed. "It was the quickest week of my life. It passed by in a blink," said Dr. Leitner.

"When I was there, I was no longer 'Dr. Leitner', I was 'Susan.' Every child I helped, every vaccine I gave, every wound I treated, it was pure medicine. It was every reason I went to medical school. I didn't have the stress of the work day, the internet, the phone calls, the charts to fill. I didn't have anyone to answer to but myself and my patients. I could do what I knew deep in my head and deep in my heart was right. I worked with amazing people all there for the same reason: To help."



She would care for the sick and try to vaccinate every child that she came into contact with. She'd scribble the date and type of the vaccine given on a note she'd tuck into the child's pocket. A small gesture, a record, she thought, in hopes that that the paper would be saved in the off chance the child would one day get regular medical care.

Project Medishare, where she worked was filled with despair and at times- hope. Loud cries and religious chants were common sounds heard from relatives of the dead and dying. While quiet peaceful moments often accompanied beautiful babies being born. Limited medical supplies, though, meant two, even three babies sharing a single incubator. The sad and ironic part of the life being born out of such sadness, she said, was that new parents were unemotional because the truth was they didn't know what they were going to do next. A tent-- as a much as a hospital bed --is considered a luxury that people don't want to leave.



To keep children entertained at night, Dr. Leitner gave out some toys she brought from home. Bubbles, balloons and silly sunglasses left over from her four-year-old son's birthday party—all to bring smiles to little ones' faces. One five year old boy brought in to be treated after being hit by a car, wouldn't react to her antics. He seemed completely lost-- not because of his injuries--but because he had gotten separated from his mother. All he could tell the doctors and staff was his name. Within 24 hours, word got out on the two local radio stations and his mother reunited with him in the hospital. "A very special moment," Leitner recalled.

And there were other uplifting ones.



“One day we took a tour of the city and a woman holding a badly burned infant ran up to the bus begging for help. The driver was not permitted to stop, but handed the woman a few dollars and told her to get to the hospital. I never thought I’d see her again. But then the next day, I heard there was an infant, a burn victim, brought in and said to myself ‘that couldn’t be the same woman’ and it was. She managed to get to the hospital and the baby was admitted for treatment. I showed her the picture I took of her the day before. I don’t know how she got there. If she

walked, or got a ride, but it was the same lady and baby.”



Seven days for Dr. Leitner that forever changed her life. Now, she says, she hopes to inspire someone else to volunteer a week of their own life to help people in deep despair.

“You don’t even need to be a doctor. Everyone can help. They need so much help.”

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