

# From Idaho to Haiti: A Medical Mission Story

**BY DEBBIE HAMILTON & JILLIEN MORGA**

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**N**early 15 years ago, Saint Alphonsus Regional Medical Center in Boise, Idaho, made the decision to expand its mission far beyond the state and into the Republic of Haiti, a “fifth-world” country more than 3,000 miles away. A board member of The Saint Alphonsus Foundation was first introduced to the dire conditions in this impoverished Caribbean nation during the process of adopting a child from a Port-au-Prince orphanage. Haiti, ravaged by decades of political unrest, street violence and environmental degradation, is widely considered to be the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere. This nation of nearly 9 mil-

lion people — residing in an area the size of Rhode Island — reports among the most startling poverty indicators in the world.

Even in the Haitian capital city of Port-au-Prince, most roads are impassable. Few residents have access to running water, sewage systems or electricity, and food is cooked using smoldering mountains of garbage as fuel. A mere two hours by air from the Florida coast, Haiti’s heartbreakingly high rates of maternal, infant and child mortality, HIV/AIDS and malnutrition create a particularly bleak outlook for the country’s littlest residents. Haiti ties for the worst calorie deficit in the world, with the average citizen consuming only 460 calories per day. Many families are able to provide their children with only one meal — every other day. According to the World Food Programme, poor nutrition has stunted the growth of more than 40 percent of Haitian children 5 years old and under; other reports indicate that only roughly half of Haiti’s children survive to celebrate their fifth birthdays. Young lives are



This Haitian child resides in the Cité Soleil village in Port-au-Prince. Children in this impoverished country are at high risk.



**The new Saint Damien Hospital in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, is a 100-bed facility dedicated to children. The Saint Alphonsus Foundation joined forces with the hospital's founder, Fr. Rick Frechette, to provide many resources for the hospital, which opened in October 2006.**

routinely lost to starvation or to simple respiratory infections and severe diarrhea from communicable diseases and contaminated water supplies — conditions readily remedied by over-the-counter medication available in most U.S. grocery stores. In the absence of the most basic of health care services — with mostly archaic medical care available only to those families who can pay out-of-pocket expenses — few resources are available to mitigate the myriad crises threatening the welfare of Haiti's children.

Through relationships developed by its board member in the mid-1990s, Saint Alphonsus leadership became acquainted not only with Haiti's challenges, but also with the work of one man committed to cultivating hope for Haiti's children despite the odds. Fr. Rick Frechette, a priest of unparalleled faith, determination and capacity to serve, has dedicated his ecclesiastical life to caring for Haiti's destitute, sick and abandoned children. Frustrated by the lack of medical capacity in Haiti, he enrolled in medical school in the United States while simultaneously managing Hôpital Saint Damien — Pétionville and Friends of the Orphans — Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos ("Our Little Brothers and Sisters"), a 600-bed orphanage he co-founded in the mountains outside of Port-au-Prince. Fr. Frechette began his clinical practice when he started Saint Damien's, once a crumbling children's hospice that he then transformed into a 100-bed children's hospital. Inspired by his determination and with the

knowledge that the smallest gestures of support could relieve the suffering of many, Saint Alphonsus associates felt a calling to respond and partner with Fr. Frechette to help heal the children of Haiti. As a not-for-profit hospital grounded in the Catholic tradition of selfless service, Saint Alphonsus could provide many of the resources that Fr. Frechette needed to fulfill his vision that Haitian children receive not only some level of care, but state-of-the-art medical services on par with those available in the industrialized world. These resources included medical and pharmaceutical supplies, skilled volunteer labor, medical training and fundraising experience.

The Saint Alphonsus Foundation became the vehicle for this partnership, cementing a connection through Project Haiti between the tranquil community of Boise, Idaho, and one of the most volatile and destitute capital cities in the world. Through 14 years of collaboration, this partnership has yielded numerous immediate and long-term results. Children have received the medical services they needed and the compassion they deserved, even if all that could be offered was the opportunity to die in dignity and comfort surrounded by loving caregivers.

In 17 organized medical trips during a 13-year period, tightly knit teams of Saint Alphonsus clinical personnel, foundation representatives, board members, and Sisters of the Holy Cross have traveled to Port-au-Prince, working side-by-side to relieve suffering, one patient at a time.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**

If you would like to learn more about Project Haiti, contact Debbie Hamilton at Saint Alphonsus Foundation at (208) 367-3997 or [debbhami@sarmc.org](mailto:debbhami@sarmc.org).

Through the years, southwestern Idaho volunteers traveling to Haiti have carried more than 1,000 duffel bags full of medical supplies to Saint Damien's. As each mission team traveled to Haiti to support the work of Fr. Frechette, they learned more and more about their new friends there. When the political unrest and violence made it impossible for the volunteers to travel to Haiti, Project Haiti continued to send medical supplies and funds to support the work of Fr. Frechette and his intrepid medical teams.

To date, the Saint Alphonsus Foundation, through Project Haiti, has raised more than \$1.5 million to fund Fr. Frechette's work. Generous contributions from the Boise community, as well as infusions from his supporters across the country and around the globe, have resulted in his dream of a new state-of-the-art pediatric hospital becoming a reality. After four years of planning, construction delays, and endless months of wait-

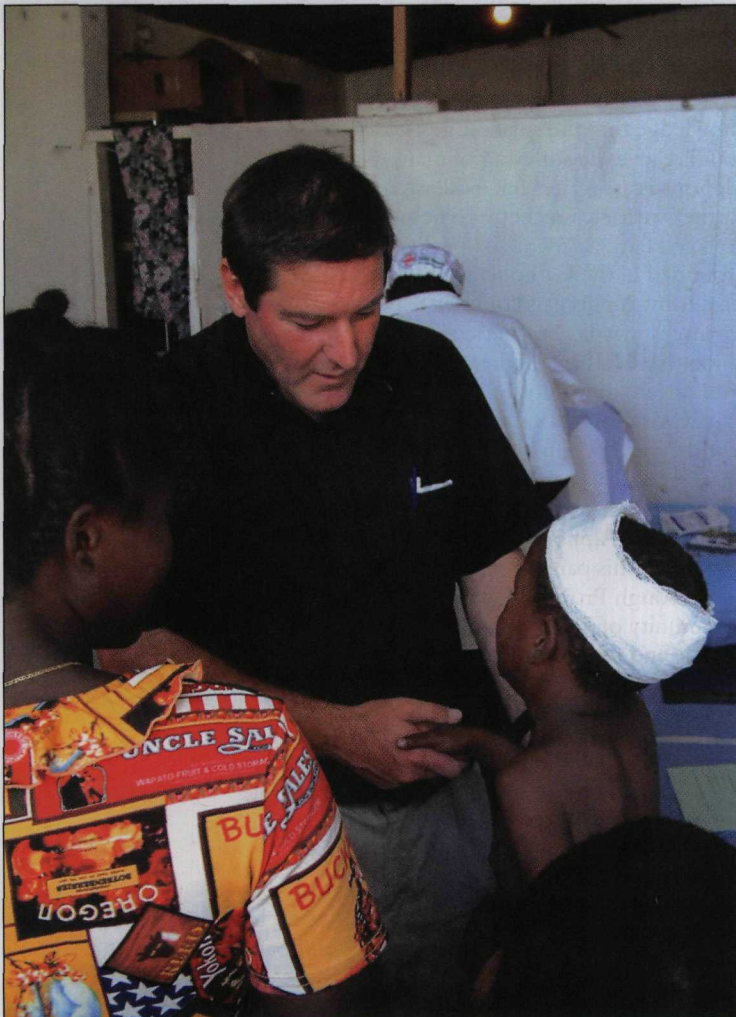
ing for supply containers to be released from customs, project supporters celebrated the completion of Hôpital Saint Damien — Chateaublond in October 2006. The new hospital now treats more than 35,000 children each year through its inpatient and outpatient programs. This beautiful facility was constructed by the hands of many dedicated Haitians in just over two years at a cost of about \$4.5 million — a remarkable feat in an environment characterized by lack of infrastructure and ever-present violence and corruption. Saint Alphonsus has continued to support Saint Damien's through gifts to equip its laboratory, ultrasound unit, pharmacy, central supply department, and medical records system with state-of-the-art equipment. The foundation has just completed fundraising efforts to further supply the hospital with an advanced digital X-ray department.

Most recently, the foundation launched a special campaign to raise emergency funding to supply Fr. Frechette with contributions to purchase beans and rice in the wake of the global food crisis, and to support his effort to plant an orchard to provide a sustainable source of produce for his patients and orphans. These feeding programs are helping to sustain many of the poor of Port-au-Prince, who are starving because of the skyrocketing cost of rice, which has risen by about 75 percent globally this year. The populaces of poor nations such as Haiti, Bangladesh, India, Egypt and Mozambique have been hit hard and some have resorted to violent rioting, looting and vandalism in the effort to feed their families. In many of these countries, the poor spend as much as 75 percent of their income on food. Haiti is one of 33 countries facing social unrest as a result of this crisis. Thanks to the generosity of southwestern Idaho donors, the emergency campaign raised more than \$27,000 in just a few weeks to support father's work.

Debbie Hamilton (co-author), the Project Haiti program coordinator, said this effort has been a success because of the following seven lessons the foundation has learned regarding partnership.

1. **Trust** your partners in the field to manage the day-to-day operations of the project, as they have the experience, knowledge and passion to understand the work that needs to be done. Be receptive to meeting the needs identified by the line personnel delivering direct services firsthand, rather than attempting to define these needs from a distance.

2. **Offer** those resources that your organization is uniquely qualified to provide, and rely on



Fr. Rick Frechette founded Saint Damien Hospital in Port-au-Prince.

others to contribute in their areas of expertise.

**3. Communicate** project goals and progress to donors and potential donors on a regular basis, without soliciting a gift with every communication. Keep charitable investors informed and involved, and provide personnel working in the field with opportunities to present directly to contributors — they will always be your most powerful spokespeople. Broadcast your mission at every opportunity, as you never know where you will find a new supporter. (In 2001, Project Haiti published *Touching Haiti . . . a Medical Mission Story*, the memoirs of one of its long-time volunteers. With copies circulated and redistributed from reader to reader throughout the community, many new supporters have learned of the needs in Haiti and have approached the foundation to get involved.)

**4. Respond** when unexpected opportunities arise — whether they are emergency needs or contributions from unfamiliar sources — and never turn down an opportunity for friend-raising. Hamilton recently received a phone call from an elementary school teacher whose rural public school class elected to adopt the project after being introduced to a copy of the Project Haiti memoir — and raised \$850 toward Fr. Frechette's efforts. Hamilton immediately scheduled a trip to visit the school, a 45-minute drive from Boise, to thank the students for their gift and further educate them on the needs in Haiti.

**5. Be Flexible** and be prepared to adapt to evolving circumstances and the local climate. Numerous Project Haiti mission trips have been canceled as a result of emerging political storms in Haiti. Organizers have learned to simply regroup following each disappointment and begin to plan for their next rotation. Project organizers have also learned to set realistic expectations, accept those conditions that they cannot change, and work within local cultural norms and ways of doing business rather than insisting on managing projects based on what works at home.

**6. Be Creative** in your fundraising and bring the field to your contributors. Incorporate artwork and artifacts from the field into silent auctions at fundraising dinners, serve meals native to the country you are supporting, and display photos at every opportunity of the real people who are being served by your efforts.

**7. Celebrate** accomplishments with all stakeholders, and always acknowledge every gift, no matter how small. Remain invested in long-term



**Suzanne Allen, M.D., M.P.H.,** assistant dean at WWAMI Idaho, participated in a recent Project Haiti trip to treat patients.

results, and short-term setbacks will appear less daunting.

While Project Haiti has at times been the recipient of an unexpectedly large gift, for which project supporters were exceedingly grateful, the mission has been sustained primarily through the modest donations of many different contributors — a point of pride for the Saint Alphonsus Foundation.

Like the single touch that means so much, the Saint Alphonsus Foundation knows that every dollar, every item and every effort the mission teams make goes a long way to alleviate the suffering of the children of Haiti. ■



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