

Letter from Elizabeth Fakina:

I met a fellow critical care nurse educator in California at a conference. He told me he was going to Haiti to teach PALS (Pediatric Advanced Life Support) and asked me to go to teach ACLS (Advanced Cardiac Life Support – Adults), as the doctors down there have not been formally trained to run codes. I did not really want to teach the entire week, I wanted to work as a staff nurse, doing direct patient care and taking care of the patients I saw on the Project Medishare Website.

I went with the idea of helping others and using my experience, skills and knowledge to contribute what I can, serve, teach and somehow have a positive impact and make a difference to the people I cared for and the level of care the hospital was providing. When I looked at the website and heard my friend's stories, I felt a strong desire to go and be a nurse for the majority of the time. I could see by the pictures that working in this environment would be very different than anything I have ever done. The more I learned about Haiti, the more I realized this was also a dangerous unstable environment. As advised, I went to a health travel agency and got the proper medications, vaccinations, education and preparation to prepare for the trip. While I was packing I was sure to bring a bible and the Rosary Paul, from our Franciscan group gave me. I said I would take it with me and give it to someone who needed it.

My entire career I have worked with only adult patients and 90 percent of my experience is in critical care adult nursing and teaching. I have never worked in the field and have always worked within the United States Medical System. My weakness has always been pediatrics, not because I couldn't learn the skills or do a good job, but because I love children so much and cannot bear to see innocent children suffer and it's way too emotional for me.

This was truly a poor community. As there was not enough protein in the food that the families brought for the patients, we gave the patients and families food, water, protein bars, clothing and anything we had to give. The majority of my protein bars went to patients who were innocent victims of violence, robbery and accidents. Protein is necessary for repair and growth, and there was no way they would heal without it. Only two patients in the ICU the week I was there were over the age of 29. My patients were gunshot wound victims, motorcycle accidents, and those that had fallen off the makeshift buses they travel on called the "tap taps".

We worked very long days that started at 6:30 in the morning and we finished 6:30 pm. We were unable to drink or brush our teeth with the tap water, the air conditioner was always broken and we were fed two meals a day. I did not eat the breakfast because it was porridge made with the water and some form of dairy that was yellowish. The hospital did not supply clothing/hospital gowns, sheets or food for the patients. Only the volunteers were fed. Most of us gave our food to the families, visitors and lived on protein bars and bottled water. At night we were taken by bus to the United Nations, the streets were dirty, crowded and full of Haitians selling goods. After dark everyone went inside where it was safe. The United Nations restaurant was a patio deck with picnic tables and diner type fast food. The only patrons of the restaurant were those the UN escorted and/or allowed there: doctors, nurses, therapists, police and missionaries. After we ate and enjoyed each other's company the bus took us back to the hospital. Sleep was the only true form of relaxation.

The 2nd night there when we got back from the UN, one of the volunteers said "I'm going to get one of the babies to hold." I thought to myself, "I wish I could do that, but I can't hold a sick baby." When she came back I looked at the baby she was holding. I could tell he wasn't very stable. I felt his pulse and it was only 66. I told her we had better bring him inside because he's not stable; we have to let one of the peds docs know. She said, "I know, he's on his way out. His mom left him here with us, and we're just waiting for him to go." Without a word, I got up, went back to my bunk bed and cried myself to

sleep. The next day, I found the rosary Paul had given me with the tag and name of our Franciscan Church. I said, "What kind of Franciscan am I? I walk away and cry? Where is my faith and strength?" The next day, before and during the shift, I held Nicholas and put the Rosary in his crib. . . ., and every day after that, I held Nicolas as much as I could. I cried each time I held him, but less and less each time. Somehow I had the strength to hold him, pray softly and comfort him. I know it made a difference when I look at the photo. Nicholas is blind and has severe hydrocephalus "water in the head". His eyes are always in the downward position because of the pressure of the fluid inside his head called "sun downing" that pushes his eyeballs into a downward gaze. When I held him and prayed softly, his breathing would slow and become relaxed instead of fast and labored. His body would relax and he was at peace. His eyes could not close, but it was as if he would fall into a restful sleep. Nicholas was also blind. I didn't realize until I looked at this picture that he is not looking down, and appears to be staring at something. I like to think it's the blessed mother, an angel or Jesus himself.

Each time a volunteer held him or changed him, they placed the Rosary back on his small chest and abdomen. It never left him. Less than a week after I went back home, he died. He died in the arms of a volunteer and with the Rosary on his small body. He was surrounded by love and prayers of the volunteers, the wonderful hospital staff and the many who prayed for him. The Rosary stayed with him, as did the impression he left in my mind and heart. I found strength and ability through faith that I didn't know I had, and I'm happy to have received that gift and to have been there for Nicholas, the many patients I cared for, their families and the doctors and nurses I taught and worked alongside of. It was an honor, and I admire their strength, commitment, resilience and faith.

The fourth night we were there, a seven-year-old girl was brought into the emergency room towards the end of the shift. Her mother had taken her to another hospital because she had a very high fever, but she was turned away because she didn't have money. She then carried her off to another hospital, which said they were too busy to help her and to come back. Her mom realized she had had a seizure and took her home and put her to bed. At about 5pm she tried to awaken her and couldn't wake her up. I heard the screaming when she arrived through the guarded gates, lots of people were screaming. The ER doctor (American) coded her for 20 minutes. I did not go into the room, because I could not help in a pediatric code. I heard the mother singing a beautiful, calm song and somehow she maintained her composure. I am guessing it was a hymn. The little girl had no pulse and was not breathing on arrival, but the doctors and nurses tried very hard to save her. Knowing what I know and seeing what I saw, this little girl would not have died if she was in the United States. Our healthcare system protects and cares for everyone regardless of ability to pay. This was the 2nd night I cried myself to sleep.

Before the volunteers leave, we donate our sheets and blankets and we are driven to another location to donate blood. The blood is returned to the hospital in the form of whole blood after it is tested. Volunteers literally give blood, sweat and tears in addition to free labor and expertise.

The hospital and Staff of Bernard Mevs in Port Au Prince are wonderful, dedicated people who stay because they want to be there, not because they can't go somewhere else and make more money, have a nicer work environment and have more state of the art equipment and options. They stay there because they want to be there, and they feel what I felt. . . . the obligation to go, to serve and to use the gifts and share all that we are blessed with and have with the less fortunate, the poor, the sick. The gift you receive in return is the experience of what it is to serve, heal, pray and be healed all at the same time.

The Haitians I met were peace loving, thankful, faithful people. There were more Catholics and Christians in Haiti than any other place I've been to (except the Vatican, of course) and they weren't afraid to pray and talk about their faith. I went as a nurse, teacher, and in the Franciscan spirit of serving and living with the poor, as they live. The faith there was so refreshing and powerful, because of the source, location, and conditions under which it radiated and flourished. I was the one who was underprivileged. This was an amazing experience and a true gift. I will go again and I was very happy to have been given this opportunity. Glad I met Sean, glad God brought me back safe, and I will never be the same again – glad for that, too!

Peace and all good things,

Liz