

Messages from Pam Taffera sent from Haiti January 11-17, 2009

1-11-2009 The sky is falling!

We arrived safely. There simply are no words to describe the day. We were practically the only Caucasian travelers on the plane to Haiti, and a sweet Haitian man approached me, tugged on the sleeve of my McNabb jersey and said... "You know, the Eagles are going down today!!!"...Heckled on the plane. Nothing like being an Eagles fan. Obviously, we have internet access, so JM, Marty, How 'bout them birds?!? When the plane touched down on the runway (yes, it was paved...) the passengers burst into applause. (Was there a chance we might *not* make it???)

Our travels went off without a hitch--leaving the airport in Port was like nothing you have ever seen. We were swarmed with Haitians trying to "help us" with our bags- i.e. take them, or carry them for us and charge us for American dollars. I'm the only newbie on the trip, so the team had me prepared. I threw this tall guy an elbow when he tried to help me with my bag, and told him "No, Sir!!!"...Turns out he is Guiseppe, an Italian Surgeon from Naples, and our Tour Guide, sent by Father Rick to pick us up... Oops. Dad, how do you apologize in Italian for shoving the nice Italian doctor?

A short trip to the hospital, which has dormitory style housing where we will be staying. Everything is open to the Haitian air, which has a salty-smoky smell...? The towns look like pictures of poverty on television, with the exception of colorful painted portraits and graffiti everywhere. The contrast of the vibrant colors with the broken down buildings is confusing.

First priority was greeting Father Rick. A close second-getting cold beers ("Prestige Beer") at the canteen, and enjoying the best beer I have ever tasted. We toured the hospital and new surgical suite. All of our minds are racing with things we would like to accomplish.

The children are beautiful. Their smiles are as big as their hearts and their illnesses are devastating. I can't wait to get my hands on them. One little boy started to mimic me, and it became a game. The children scream "Blehm, blehm!" when they see us. ("Whites, whites!")

Tonite the hospital is showing Chicken Little for the children. "The sky is falling!" sounds funny in French. We stood on the roof of the hospital and looked out to the mountains where one by one, until the mountain side looked like a starry sky, lights of little villages appeared.

Plantains, Chicken, Rice, and more "Prestige" for dinner. We are going to sit on the roof, eat and plan out our week. Dr. Bevilacqua has also challenged everyone to a game of UNO. I asked if he knows how to play Pitch, but he doesn't. I bet Guiseppe does.

Tomorrow will start with mass and blessing of the deceased children from the last 24 hours. I'm not sure what will follow. I'm overwhelmed-the saddest and happiest I have ever been.

I love you all so much. Dad, I can see the American Embassy from the window next to my bed. Marty-don't forget to feed the kitties.

I love you guys...more as soon as possible. Love and prayers!
One starfish at a time...Love, Pam

~~2009-2009-2009~~ There **are** shoe sales in Haiti!

Last night was the best night of sleep I have ever had. I woke up sweaty and stinky, but the cool Haitian breeze made it all okay. It's hard to remember that we are on an island, as we are surrounded by mountains, carved out of the world with sharp edges. I've never seen mountains without trees.

I'll never be able to fit all that I learned today into this email. We woke up and showered (Loosely-very loosely, I says we showered.)...We walked down to the chapel on the grounds of St. Damien's where a mass of people stood with their children, all with hopes of being seen at the clinic today. After those waiting chanted in Creole with Father Rick, he entered the small chapel with us to celebrate mass. While we were at mass, the staff busily and with fantastic organization planned the day: The first 120 patients would be seen today. Others would have to return tomorrow. Something tells me the number 120 is loose also. After mass, Guiseppe pulled me aside to point out that the chapel was built by Italian architects as was a beautiful ceramic portrait of the Blessed Mother, made by a famous Italian. Guiseppe and I are paissions now.

After mass, coffee and protein bars. We are stocked with them. Lessons for the newbie for next year (yes, Dad, next year...) bring more water in bottles and don't bring the protein bars covered in chocolate. Its 85 degrees. We sat with Father Rick and planned the week.

Dr. Bevilacqua and Dr. Lynch are surgeons. They think like surgeons and I can see excitement in their eyes at the possibility of surgery in the new surgical suite. Putting my disdain for surgeons aside, I too got a burst of energy thinking about what we would do for the week. I have to ask Elise how to spell the names of the towns we have been to today. Having heard a lot about Dad's point of view on the world, the rest of the team has suggested I not email you all the names of the towns that we visited, for fear that Dad might Google them and send the FBI to pick me up.

First we went out to a clinic run by the order of Mother Theresa to see patients in their clinic. We counted out meds, and saw new patients for the day. The most difficult and frustrating part was not having a translator. We are taught in medical school that 80% of a diagnosis is from the patient history, 10% from physical exam, 10% from tests/studies...but I couldn't ask the patients about their symptoms or how long they felt this way. The children laughed at me as I weakly attempted French from a vocabulary list Elise brought along... We treated a man with heart failure, another with pyelonephritis, 2 children with gastroenteritis (maybe infectious?), and lots of coughs with diagnoses yet to be determined.

I sat on the beds with each patient. Universal hand shakes were appreciated with smiles. A cockroach ran over my leg while I looked in someone's ear. OK, time to stand at bedside. (I managed not to scream...but it was tough.)

Dr. Bevilacqua and Dr. Lynch complimented me, saying I had to teach them primary care, since they had been away from it so long. Nonsense-they are two of the finest "primary care surgeons" I have even met.

We hopped back in the truck and headed to the shoreline, where we climbed a rickety spiral staircase into a children's clinic. Rafael, our gang leader escorted us into the clinic- he is the leader of our gang and others, apparently. Here, we had options like vitamins, antibiotics, anti-parasitics, electrolyte replacement fluids... but in between each patient I could not help but to feel more hopeless. Dr. Bevilacqua caught me in thought and, reading my mind he said "You **are** helping, you know." It's why he returns each year.

This clinic also has a program for malnourished children and provides them with protein biscuits, rice, etc. Every Tuesday morning the children return to be weighed. They put the children in a canvas grocery bag and hang them from a scale to check their weight (like the scales in the grocery store). One child kissed me, and I

was embarrassed for turning my cheek to her when she intended to kiss me smack on the nose. I kissed her nose in return.

Everything in Haiti shuts down around 3. Seriously, everything. We drove back to the compound, and the sites were amazing to see. Everything is for sale-fruit and sugar cane, blue jeans, scrap metal, mattresses, Haitian art. One block was lined with shoes galore. Showing the team once again how “low maintenance” I am, I said... “Oooh, a shoe sale. Can we stop? Dr. Engel was wrong; she said there wouldn’t be shoe sales in Haiti.”

An awesome meal was prepared for us upon our return. We found out this morning that we would not need to cook for ourselves. Ever since the floods in September and the collapsed school in November, families have been living here at St. Damien’s, and they all chip in. The place works like clockwork. We gave them all the food we brought, and they did more with it than we could have! Steamed carrots and beans, pasta with tuna and tomato sauce. And some seasoning...that everything in Haiti has. I’ll have to ask about this.

We ate on the roof again, shared stories of our experiences. Poor Ed and Elise... Doctors can be such motor mouths. I’m noting to myself that tonight and tomorrow I hope to learn more about them. I hope I can teach them some medicine while we are here.

A mouse lives in the computer room. Last night as I was emailing you all, he ran across the desk right in front of me. I wasn’t afraid of him, but he startled the crap out of me, and of course I screamed. I could here laughter from the team sitting up on the roof--And Dr. Bevilacqua’s voice shouts down--”Welcome to Haiti!!!” This morning there were mouse terd on the keyboard. Patrick (on of Fr. Rick’s volunteers) says the mouse is way too smart and has been here a while.

Our day ended around 4pm. This frustrated me...everything was closed. I feel like we could use these hours... but in Haiti, this is when the day ends, and it is time to rest, play soccer, pray, sit quietly. American’s could take a lesson from this an end their days at 4pm to reflect once in a while. Elise and Dr. Bevilacqua went for a run; Dr. Lynch went to watch the boys play soccer. Ed and I read, and both took siestas, I think. The team got back a little while ago. Tonite, some UNO and story telling by Fr. Rick. I can’t wait.

Tomorrow we have to get up “early, early, early” per Rafael, we are going out into the mountains and it may take 2 hours. Uh-oh... Them team is waiting for me. They say I spend a lot of time on the computer... We are headed to the canteen for Prestige for our card games.

Have to run. Love and prayers to you all.
I love you each so much!
Shoefully yours,
Pam

1-13-2009 Not high maintenance...just a little trouble maker!

I just took the most fantastic freezing cold shower of my life. If it weren’t for every other moment of this trip, it might have been my favorite. No words, photos, or email can offer justice to the day we had today. (Note: I can feel the computer room mouse staring at me. I don’t know exactly where he is, but I heard him rummaging and I know he is here.)

Today, I have been puked on, bled on, sneezed on, and jumped on (by lice, I think.) And, it was probably the most wonderfully awful day I have ever experienced.

We woke up to share mass at 7am. Fr. Rick continues to have an interesting and enlightening message each day

which inspires and encourages. After a melty protein bar and cup of coffee that would make my Nona's Sanka blush, we hopped in the truck with our crap-ton of supplies and headed out to Miraguane. Fr. Rick and Rafael estimated the trip would take approximately an hour and a half. I knew we were in trouble when we stopped at the "mall" for gallons of water. We were in for the ride of our lives thru the mountains of Haiti...Kudos to Jimmy and Rafael for navigating the terrain.

4 and a half hours later, and with the greatest urinary urgency I have ever in my life experienced, we arrived to the town which would become our clinic for the day. We set up a clinic for adults and children as well as a dental clinic. By dental clinic, I mean Dr. Bevilacqua, one of the students, pliers, Novocain, and a bucket. Holy crap. And by children's and women's clinic, I mean chaos. Sheer chaos.

Fast forward through 5 hours of coughing, puking, bleeding, etc (usually on me) and we may have spit into the ocean that is the need for primary care in Haiti. It was dusk, and without electricity, we couldn't continue. So we packed up...and got mauled by the crowd. I was not prepared for this. They begged us to stay, pulled on our clothing, put their little hands in front of us, pointed at their ears asking for me to look inside them with my fantastic flashlight. It sucked. It just plain sucked.

After our day ended, we went back to the Cathedral of Miraguane. We got a burst of energy and played on the steps. It temporarily distracted me from the images of children's faces at our "clinic" as we pulled away and they chased the truck. When we entered the church, we all took a solemn moment to realize what the day had been.

I asked a girl in the street to take our photo with my camera. I also asked her to take just the picture and not my camera, which perplexed her. Overwhelmed by guilt when she gladly took the picture for us and never thought of running with my camera, I grabbed 5 dollars out of my bag and chased her. I pushed it secretly into her hand, wrapped her fingers around it, and said "Shhhh..." If anyone in the street saw this happen, we would have been swarmed and possibly attacked. Rich and Ed almost killed me when I got back. I'd do it again.

As thanks for our work, the nuns of the Bishop prepared a beautiful meal for us...It was embarrassing to sit at their table and eat their food--I'm not sure how many days they will not eat because of this. But their feelings would have been terribly offended had we not shared in their feast. The priest and staff thanked us again and again--we should be thanking him for sharing his people with us. All we did was spit in the wind. I don't know that I helped a single person in Haiti today. Certainly not compared to what they have taught me.

We piled in the truck and made the long voyage home. Haiti at night is a beautifully frightening sight. Back in the walls of our compound, we headed to the canteen for some Prestige (which, by the way, was the World Cup Winner of Beer in 2000)...but the canteen was closed. I poked Rafael in the stomach: "Rafael, you got any idea how to pick a lock???" ...Dr. Bevilacqua looked at me with a grin and said-"I have to tell Engel. You're not high maintenance; you're just a trouble maker!"

Tomorrow is surgery day. Guiseppe, Rich, and Greg are stoked like kids on Christmas. Surgeons get this way. I'm starting to like surgeons a whole lot better. The world needs more of them like Rich and Greg. And Guiseppe.

Eddie, Jimmy, Amaral, and Rafael were lifesavers today. They are Fr. Rick's men, and they would never let anything happen to us. They were interpreters, workers, hand holders, body guards, pharmacists...and our awesome drivers. I offered to drive back at the end of the evening, explaining to the boys that American Women are Excellent drivers...The Haitians laughed harder than the Americans.

I'm exhausted. Liz-thanks for sharing my notes with the team. I miss you guys, a lot. After this day, I will never,

ever, ever complain about clinic day again. (Did I say ever? Maybe I don't mean ever...) Marty-please forward this to Debbie. And, please feed the kitties. I'm sorry Grace pooped in the tub again. She must miss me. Dr. Engel-Fr. Rick went to NYCOM. He is, as far as I know, the true (yet nameless) leader of Haiti. It is unreal. Thank you for your kind words. I need to take one of your literature classes. Ang, JM, Aidin, Mom and Dad... I've shown everyone your pictures, and they feel like they know you already. Yes, I'm eating. And, I'm safe. Mama, what's for dinner on Sunday? Can we schedule it around the NFC Game? :) Sarah, dreams of Bocas are on my mind! I'm bringing you here someday. Tracie and Matt-hope there is lots of kicking going on!

I'm going to have a glass of vino with Guiseppe before bed.
Love and prayers, Pam

1-14-2009 Can someone please swat the fly away from the sterile field?

Surgery day today!

...And a reminder of why I am **not** a surgeon.

The day started wonderfully as usual, Haitian sunrise and cool mountain/ocean breeze, followed by mass with Father Rick. We are getting to meet some of the other volunteers around here; they are really neat individuals. For right now, we are the only docs.

The day got off to a slow start...Haitian time is a little like island time, without the pina coladas. Just got back after a day in the O.R. with the team. This is not the operating room we all know and love from the U.S.A. First off, there is a little bit of chaos. I'm finding that chaos usually precedes brilliance in Haiti, so I am learning to roll with it.

Guiseppe has taken two of Fr. Rick's orphan teenage boys and taught them how to run an O.R. This is not an easy task, because first, he taught them Italian. It is very difficult for surgeons to have assistants who cannot anticipate their next move. He is doing wonderful work for these boys. He tells me, oh, how do you say in English, they have "fortunato." I told Guiseppe he **is** their fortunato. Funny, also, how two 19 year old Haitian boys revert back to Creole and watch their P's and Q's when they learn the girl doctor in the room understands Italian. As I left for the day, I told them, good-bye, thank you, good work today, and I'll see you tomorrow, all in Italian---go figure, Haitians **can** blush!!!

They did 6 cases today, all what we would consider to be minor surgery in the US. We removed fatty tumors (called lipomas) and cottage cheese like material filled cysts (called sebaceous cysts)...I was reminded of how big the learning curve is in medical school and residency when I saw how amazed Elise and Ed (our U of Scranton students) were by the cysts. It was cool to offer them some insight on how the OR runs. I explained to them that Haitian surgery (and perhaps Italian surgery) is **slightly** more laid back than in the States. For instance, I was the only one who seemed concerned with the fly in the surgical field. Ummm...

Elise is fantastic. She, I predict, is a future pediatrician, maybe family doctor...definitely primary care. She loves everything about medicine-but mostly the people. She offers a very tender hand and warm smile to each patient. She is soft spoken but incredibly bright...She has much to offer, and doesn't even know it yet! Her huge blue eyes and Irish freckles engulf everything around her. It is neat to watch Greg, her Dad, and our vascular surgeon on the team, see her experience all this stuff for the first time.

Ed is also awesome. He is Rich's right hand man, and a future surgeon of the group. He is way-excited by... well, everything! He's got surgeon written all over him, dying to get his hands in or on everything there is. He is respectful and full of questions. He has no fear of medicine, patients, or trying something for the first time...and

he is way smart. He digests information very well. He's going to NYU next year, and he is surely going to kick ass. (There is no other way to say it.)

I got to spend some time with Rich today as we watched a patient post op. She was a 13 year old girl with a mass on her parotid gland (in her cheek) and she was the only patient we sedated...Without the technology we have in the USA to monitor her, Rich and I sat in the hallway next to her for a few hours until she was totally lucid and steady on her feet. This hallway served as the recovery room, waiting room, pre-op prep room, and eventually the physicians lounge, as we all enjoyed the best Coca Cola I've ever tasted. The Haitians in the "waiting" area stared at us like we were performing voodoo. When I would wave at them and smile, they all turned away from the crazy blehm...

Rich is very cool. I find that our backgrounds are very similar, irregardless of our different specialties. He was raised by an Irish mom and Italian dad. We laughed as we contrasted family stories of Italian weddings and Irish funerals. Our families are oddly similar; it made me have a twinge of homesickness. Rich is amazing...although he works in a wealthy suburb of Hartford Connecticut, he has true passion to serve, and seeks out underserved of his area. He taught me today that service can be anywhere.

I'm still getting to know Greg. He is quiet and calm. He is gentle and kind to the patients, and keeps one eyeball on Elise at all times. He shares a sarcastic wit with me, and I appreciate when he laughs at my jokes that no one else gets (It's a Taffera family curse.)

I'm without the team right now (not to worry, Dad, Rafael is not far.) They went to the nearest dental office to help an Irish Volunteer who fell off a motorcycle today and broke her jaw. Yikes! I am looking forward to hearing the story of how she did when they return.

It's been three days now, and I feel like the computer room mouse and I are tight. At my sister's suggestion (I don't know why I hadn't thought of this earlier, thanks Ang!) I have named him Pierre. It suits him, and I think I might make a sign for the door, to let others know he shares this space. Mouse terd on the keyboard is also a distinct sign of his presence, but temporary. The sign would be my permanent mark on Haiti.

Tonite, you guessed it, Prestige and UNO, hopefully to be complimented with story telling from Father Rick. Today was a day of assisting and observing for me. I can see how Rich, Greg, and Guiseppe all have big plans for this surgical suite. I can only imagine how well in with be functioning in a few months.

The children downstairs (overflow patients from the hospital and orphans from the floods/school collapse) have learned "Bye bye!" from us. It's great. Whether they see us coming or going, they all start grinning, waving and chanting, "Bye bye!" "Buh-bye!" "Byebyebye!" It's great. It is in their smiles that I see the face of God. We call them the "Bye-Bye Kids."

I'm starved. I'm giving the team until I take a cold shower, and then I am eating without them (not really). Ed has been holding out on us so far this week-we just found out he knew where the brownies are that were baked for us by Dr. Engel. He's in big trouble for that one!

Tomorrow, to Wharf Jeremy. We'll set up clinic again...The chaos will ensue. Hey, it's Haiti.

Thanks for reading, everyone, and thanks for your kind words and prayers. It's made me smile everytime I open my inbox. Hope all is well at home. How's the weather, haha?

Love and prayers, Pam

PS-Rich is grounded. He disappeared with Elise and Ed...looking for material to wire a jaw shut...They had been gone 5 hours before I started to get really worried. Making me wait up like that, they are all grounded!!!

1-15-2009 Auld Lang Syne (The New Year's Song)

Today was a wild day of ups and downs. I am so glad to end it on a happy note. I've just left the team upstairs on the veranda. They are enjoying some Prestige and chatting about the Scranton experience. Eddie, a mountain climber and painter from Baltimore is with us, and I feel bad for him as we go on and on with our Scranton stories. Eddie is a sad soul, he comes to Haiti to escape his life in the USA, as do many of the other volunteers. Father Rick finds the most wonderful place in the world away from home for them, and Haiti gives them hope and purpose. I feel so lucky to know that I would never be able to leave you all behind for a year (or years) at a time...I miss each of you very much. Eddie is a good and kind soul. He came down to paint the water tower for Fr. Rick, and it looks beautiful.

I've been holding out on you all; I've not told you about a part of our day that has been ritual. I did not have the words to describe it. I still don't. Every morning after mass, we go to the highest room in the hospital, where the children who have died the night before lie wrapped in their bedclothes. We unwrap them, cleanse them with water, and wrap them in white butcher paper, while praying over them and spreading incense. Holding their dead, cold, limp bodies in my hands in numbing... Fr. Rick and his assistant chant in harmonious Creole, and I am stunned each morning... The most unfortunate part of this story--1) their deaths were preventable (mostly) and 2) they have families and mothers who are able to bury them... much unlike the unclaimed dead.

The prayer Fr. Rick says over them is beautiful-I must bring it home.

Every Thursday, Fr. Rick's team gathers ~50 coffins, made with care from old cardboard boxes by the orphans, and painted with the Passionist Christ symbol. I had an opportunity to load the coffins into the trucks with them. The air was stale with grief today. Jimmy and Rafael started drinking warm red wine earlier today than usual. The rest of the Scranton team had been to this funeral before, and Fr. Rick needed them in Wharf Jeremy today, so they sent me (under the protection of Jimmy and Rafael) to the morgue and funeral. Rich and Greg said it was important for me to experience, but I felt guilty not going where there was need. And, I was scared as hell to go on without my team. Jimmy and Rafael never let me out of their sight.

We drove silently to the morgue. Outside, masses of flies drank from pools of blood and body fluids. I covered my mouth with a bandana, and still was disgusted by the deepest smell of death. Into the dark morgue, where blood stained floors lead to "freezers" of bodies, piled on top of one another. These are the unclaimed dead of Haiti. Fr. Rick is determined to offer them a dignified funeral. We packed the bodies into cardboard coffins, laying twine rosaries (also made by Fr. Rick's orphans...he finds jobs for those who need them...) over their heads. Multiple bodies fit in each coffin...The stink was nothing compared to the long faces and solemn hearts of the Haitians who came to claim the unclaimed dead.

We drove, silently again, with the masses of flies following, and the stench of death lingering, to the most beautiful mountainside of Haiti, along the Caribbean Ocean with the brightest sunlight shining... There, men had been preparing graves all morning, as they do every Thursday...And the band played on. 2 trumpet players, 2 trombones, a snare drum and a symbol...all children, led by an adult trumpet player...played a celebration of Haitian life, Auld Lang Syne, again and again and again... The men beat white wooden crosses into the ground (also crafted by the orphans in need of jobs)...and we walked away...

I didn't speak a word for the next 3 hours. And I still don't know what to say.

Rafael and Jimmy ensured that I met back up with my team in Wharf Jeremy, where they were running another

clinic. It was much like our clinic from the other day, except that it was easier to leave this time, as we played and joked with the children who showed off for us with cartwheels and tricks.

We arrived back to St. Damien's feeling a bit defeated. Our clinic had closed early (the busy life ends around 3-4PM in Haiti...) and none of us felt as though we had helped anyone that day. Frustrated, hot, and sweaty, we arrived back to our compound to find that Fr. Rick had received 3 truckloads of donations from the United States. They had been stuck in customs for about 2 weeks, and finally been released today. The 5 Blehm Doctors and 30 Haitian men unloaded 2 days worth of work in under 5 hours...The best gift in the trucks? A fork lift for the team here in Haiti...Watching the Haitian's enjoy goods from the United States made me sad...luxuries such as belts, shoes, pencils...And most of what we sent was "junk" we needed to get rid of. Fr. Rick ignored the men stuffing gifts into their pockets from the donations. He knows they need it. There was kindness, junk, prayers, and a crap-ton of awesome supplies in those 3 trucks. There is nothing in this world like watching 30 Haitian men dig thru our junk and think it is the most fantastic thing they have ever seen. Or like watching them figure out how to run a fork lift. What a crafty bunch.

Sweaty, stinky (much stinkier than ever before...), and sore, we enjoyed Prestige with Fr. Rick as he told fantastic stories that should be shared with the world. Rich told Fr. Rick---"All I know is that you definitely don't drink enough." Fr. Rick agreed.

Back to the compound with Prestige and to enjoy the most interesting "meatball" I have ever tasted and great conversations, takes me to right now. Fr. Rick noted this morning that in the Gospel, the authors often mention family lines and genealogy...It puts people in place and time...the message he gave to each of us: "Right now in time, there is you. You are here right now. If not now, if not you---when? And, who?"

Time for a (brrrrr) shower... I'm actually looking forward to it! This is not to say that I am not looking forward to a hot shower at home.

These notes offer only a grain of sand worth of beaches of emotion that I experienced today. I'm floored. This experience has changed my life forever. I love and appreciate you all so much.

Love, Pam

1-16-2009 If you think about it too much...

One of the "Buh-bye" kids just peed...on me. Awesome. They are way too cute, and make us smile after the toughest days. Playing with children has no limitations, as the language of fun is completely universal. On our drive back today, we saw, what we thought was a dead body on the side of the road...Nothing should surprise you in Haiti, but we were thankfully shocked to find she was just a bit dehydrated. This can be solved with some IV fluids and a bed to rest in tonight, but unfortunately there is no treatment for schizophrenia in Haiti...

It is our last full day in Haiti. We are all anticipating returning to the USA and being beaten in the face with the cold winds blowing over the Northeast region of the country. We would prefer, however, *not* to make a miraculous landing on the Hudson, if at all possible. I imagine my poor father hasn't a hair left on his head.

Speaking of my father, you should see how they drive down here--it's wild. There are no rules, speed limits, street signs (sometimes there are no streets...), and there are definitely no seatbelts. The most polite thing to do? Lay on your horn as you go around a corner or pass another vehicle (on the left *or* the right), so that others *might* be able to get out of your way in time. If not, a Haitian will tell you, they simply were not quick enough.

Today was a neat day. It started off bright, as there were no deceased children's bodies to bless. And, we got

to see a bit more about the inner workings of the hospital at St. Damien's. There was much manual labor to be done, and we were glad to be part of the team...

First, Father Rick took the 5 most obsessive compulsive people in Haiti (the 5 white docs...) and put us to work organizing the pharmacy. I was in organizational heaven. He said he'd be back in 3 hours to get us, but that storage closet looked like your nearest CVS in under an hour. So then, we followed Father Rick around like puppies until he found more tasks for us to do. Silly Americans.

Next, we had an opportunity to follow up on some patients from the week...Adele (the Irish woman hit by the motorcycle) came to have her wires tightened to keep her jaw steady. What a brave, kind person she is! We sent her back to the orphanage (where she volunteers) with all of our protein shakes. This broken jaw was exactly the diet she did not need. We rechecked wounds on 3 of the patients from our "surgery" day on Wednesday... And, we removed bandages from the two young men injured in the truck crash (one had a puncture wound to his leg, the other a huge laceration across his face). Now, *that* is continuity of care.

I learned over the past week that the Haitian way would blow Americans away...Let's just say they never do anything once, and they never *quite* get it right the first time...and that's all pretty ok. Last night, we unloaded 3 tractor trailers of goods from the USA into large storage facilities...This morning we took all of those supplies OUT of the storage unit and put it onto truck to be distributed around Haiti...actually, we put it on the *wrong* truck, and then had to unload the materials once again until the suitable truck for this trip arrived, which we promptly RE-loaded...Frustration? Only amongst the Americans, as we all claimed there had to be a more efficient way to do this. The Haitians? They laughed, made fun of the former Haitian dictator, and enjoyed each moment in the blazing sun. Father Rick went with the flow as usual. He chuckled as the comedy of errors ensued, and said, multiple times, in his gentle French Canadian accent, "Oh well, you know...anyways, here we go..."

Father Rick explained to us: "If you don't think about something, it probably won't get done. However, and here's the key...if you think about it too much, it'll never get done." So without thought, we unloaded and loaded, and unloaded the gigantic boxes until they were ready for delivery. Then we reloaded what was left, because we took too much stuff out and there was no more room in the truck.

Finally, my first ride in a tap-tap! We jumped into the back of a brightly painted pick-em-up truck with a Conestoga wagon top and headed to the beach...Well, not quite the beach. We went to Cabaret where the floods of September had washed out and entire community. We delivered the boxes of goods (clothing, food, supplies, you name it) to the nuns and priests to distribute quietly thru the community. Quiet distribution is important for 2 reasons 1) to prevent rioting, and 2) to prevent the government from seizing the supplies. How beautiful this end of the Haitian peninsula looked, cleansed and made new by the rains and raging waters...but how devastated the faces of the people in this community, who lost what little they had...And so, they rebuild.

Father Rick has mastered the art of storytelling...He offers descriptions that make you feel as though you were there with him as he experienced them. And in each story he offers lighthearted laughter and a lesson from God. It's truly unbelievable. I will probably massacre them, and couldn't possible tell them appropriately, however my favorite stories from the week are...

1. The night the American Embassy tried to close St. Damien's for their 4th of July cocktail party...And Fr. Rick moved the blockade with his back-ho...
2. The night the nuns of Mother Theresa stood on the kitchen table with water from the floods up to their necks, while chanting Hail Mary's...
3. The next night, after Fr. Rick and his team saved the same nuns from the flood, and they wouldn't let the team stay the night, because men were not allowed in the nuns' home...
4. Why the average length of stay at a hospital in Haiti is about 30 days, and how their plan is probably better

than the entire US healthcare system...

5. How Fr. Rick managed to get the morgue workers released from prison after they were wrongfully placed their for life...It involved the Haitian mafia (who come highly recommended from the Arch Bishop), 4,000 American dollars, and 2 phone calls...

6. How a well known Witch Doctor friend of Fr. Rick's called at the beginning of the week with apologies, because someone had paid her to send 7 she-devils after him. The witch doctor made apologies, telling Father that it is the job she was paid to do, but she wanted to give him fair warning...

7. How Fr. Rick went on to explain that while he doesn't believe in Voodoo, "Just because you don't believe it, doesn't mean it isn't there" and "Perhaps we are all just using different words to describe the same thing."

And so, today, we returned to our Haitian home, feeling accomplished, as though we had contributed to the behind-the-scenes inner workings of Fr. Rick's plan. (Again, we were such a teeny tiny part of the world that Fr. Rick Frechette and Dr. Paul Farmer have created...) We were excited to find out that Fr. Rick (and 15 Haitians) will be on the flight from Port-au-Prince to JFK tomorrow...He is taking all of the folks who have been working with his organization for 20 years+ on a journey to Jerusalem... He continues to leave me awe-inspired each day. (Traveling with Fr. Rick will also make the trip through the airport and thru customs verry easy. Connections, you know? How 'bout that, Dad?!)

Tonight? You guessed it-Prestige and UNO. We've hardly played UNO at all this week, as we have instead enjoyed conversation together. We are determined to have an UNO tournament tonight, as it is our "Carnival" or last night here in Haiti. Also, Fr. Rick plans to visit more with us and share stories.

The faces of Fr. Rick, Raphael, Jimmy, Eddie, Amaral (quiet guy whose name I couldn't figure out), Adele, Guiseppe, Julian, Valore, Beatrice, the "Buh-bye" kids, and the countless nameless Haitians who blessed my life this week, will forever remain imprinted in my memory. I can't wait to share these faces with you all, as I have been obsessively photo-journaling.

Marty, I have to warn you, I've never looked (or smelled) my worse. Please let me back into the apartment. I miss the kitties. Mom and Dad, I've been very very careful and kept myself well fed. But there is nothing like coming home to parents as amazing as you. Ang, JM, and Aidin, Ohwee(!) and thanks for the emails...your kind words kept me strong. Liz, DW, Dr. Mancano, Jen, and the whole Saint Joe's team-thank you for having me prepared for this trip and for holding the fort. I could not be more blessed to train in our program. Bradley--how 'bout them Birds!? Dr. Engel, everyone is looking forward to seeing you on Sunday. Thank goodness you sent those brownies, I never want to see a protein bar again! Judy and Debbie, thanks for sharing your awesome family with me! Looking forward to catching up! Tracie and Matthew, I hope to stop in for a visit on Sunday. I can't wait to see the 3 of you! Sarah...I'm humming a certain birthday tune, and I'm *calling it*-we are going out for your birthday this week, whether you like it or not! :) Can't wait to catch up. I love you all, thank you for reading my long winded stories this week.

OK, one last cold shower before the UNO tournament. The team just got back from a run and they are teasing me about the amount of time I have spent emailing. Tomorrow morning-Mass, Haitian Coffee, helping out wherever we can in the AM at the clinic, then off to the airport with Fr. Rick.

Love and prayers to all of you. I leave Haiti with a happy/confused/heavy/inspired heart. I am determined to return. But for now, USA, here we come!

Love, Pam

1-17-2009 Signing off from Haiti...

Well, time for one last quick email... Hi, everyone!

We woke up this morning, disappointed to find that on Saturday there is no mass, but excited that Fr. Rick had ideas for how we could spend our last morning in Haiti. He sent us to City Soleil to the Clinic of Saint Joseph, where the nuns of Mother Theresa run a clinic every Saturday. Fr. Rick said there would be 500+ people to be seen at the clinic, and they could use all the help they could get.

After preparing our bags for the airport, Rich grabbed the pliers and the bucket, and we slung our stethoscopes around our necks for one last Haitian Clinic. It took approximately 45 minutes to get there, 10 miles from our compound...this is because the streets were full of thousands of Haitians-it is market day on Saturday. Our driver today, Pierre Mechel (who drives like a wild man) safely (???) navigated thru the crowds--by navigated I mean, (you guessed it) laid on the horn and expected people to jump out of the way. I am not sure how we did not commit vehicular homicide this morning. The crowds would open up (Ed described it as trying to part the Red Sea) to let our truck pass, and then swallow us back up and follow us thru town. What a spectacle we were! Blehm! Blehm!

We had to walk half a block thru the crowds to get to the sisters of Mother Theresa. Admittedly, this is the first time this week I felt genuinely scared and threatened. Into the walls of the clinic, we split up to see the hundred of folks who were lucky enough to have an orange ticket and be seen by the "docteur" today. I saw approximately 50 adults/kids in about an hour and a half (This will make clinic at home seem like a breeze!).... Greg and Elise helped with a wound care clinic (The worst, most fungating, oozing, pussing wounds we have ever ever seen)...and Rich and Ed pulled up a chair and a bucket and pulled teeth. By 1030, Pierre Mechel started to get a little worried about getting us back thru the crowds. Fr. Rick had given him instructions to get us back in time. Missing your flight in Haiti is not quite as easy to reschedule.

We just got back, and all agreed that if we don't have scabies now, we are never going to get them. I'm itchy just thinking about it.

So, here we sit, listening to the chants of Buh-byes below us, overwhelmed by the chaos that ensued this morning. Life in downtown Port-au-Prince or City Solei makes Midtown Manhattan look mundane... We sort of wish we had known of this clinic earlier so that we could have spent more time in this community...Hundreds of hundreds of people need so much help--basic primary care, public health, and human rights that we take for granted on a daily basis. I'm bewildered.

Our bags are packed and we are headed to the airport in about an hour. The team tells me there are fantastic hotdogs and beer at the airport (?)...I am not sure what make a Haitian hotdog more ok than Haitian water, but what the hell...Sorry, Marty, I can't bring you back a hotdog, I'll never get through customs.

Guiseppe asks if we can come back in May, when he expects to have an anesthesiologist and the OR working at full capacity. I don't think May will be a possibility for me, but I will be back. Guiseppe tells me I better work on my Italian in the meantime. He also tells me I always have a home in Naples. I didn't invite him to Old Forge in return, though; All my mother needs is the high maintenance Italians (they travel in packs) showing up on her doorstep...Ed says Guiseppe is more high maintenance than I am. Guiseppe comes up to us daily as says, "Oh, yes, I have problem for which you help?" He's pretty funny.

We've exchanged email addresses with Jimmy, Rafael, Julian, Volare, Guiseppe, and of course Father Rick. Maybe I can help a bit from home. And hopefully I can keep up with my Haitian family.

Everyone is thanking us as we leave...However, I can not express the appropriate gratitude I have for everyone here and this experience.

And, as Fr. Rick says: Oh well, you know...anyways, here we go...
My love and many hugs to all of you. Thank you for being with me this week.
Thank you for your emails, prayers, kind words, and for being part of my life...
See you soon! Love, Pam

1-17-2009 Addendum: The Airport

We jumped in the truck for one last time to head to the airport. It was time to say goodbye—but as we loaded our bags into the truck, the Bye-Bye Kids said nothing. They stared at us, with their fingers in their mouths, faces long, almost disappointed in us. They knew we would not return at the end of the day—but not one of them said bye-bye. This broke my heart.

This time I was prepared for the airport. When we got to the door, I was pretty sure we were never getting through the chaos and crowds to our flight. Ed, Elise, and Greg rolled with it. My forehead vein was bulging, and I noted that Rich has a similar forehead vein. But, remember, with Father Rick at our side, all sorts of exceptions were made. We decided not to wait in line, and went to the business class check in with Fr. Rick. Much to the dismay of the assistant at the counter and with some pleading by Father Rick, Rich was able to check all 5 of us in. Fr. Rick then took his passport and the passports of his 13 travel mates to another desk, where I could see the assistant was equally annoyed. But, for Father Rick, exceptions are made.

It was at this point that we realized none of our tickets (Except Ed's!?) had seat numbers on it. The American Airlines clerk assured us that this did not mean we were on standby-but in Haiti, nothing is certain. Through 3 security checkpoints, and we were at our gate. American Airlines was desperately trying to get *yesterday's* flight to Miami off the ground, and they had little time to answer our seat number questions.

Ed, Elise, and Greg read their books calmly. Rich and I bit our nails and pretended not to worry about our numberless tickets. No sooner had the engines started to roar for the flight to Miami and Rich and I were up to the desk (for the 3rd time) with our numberless tickets. I explained to the assistant, "See, I have to get to JFK *today* or my father is totally going to lose it..." As I wasn't making a whole lot of sense, Rich explained that our tickets needed seat assignments. Weren't we pleasantly surprised when she printed out first class tickets for the team!? I could have kissed her. I was sad to leave Haiti, but there is something to be said for going home...

With *numbered* tickets in our hands, we were off to the Duty Free shop for Haitian Trinkets, a year's supply of Haitian coffee for the Lynch family, ridiculously cheap whiskey for 444 Quincy Avenue, and the *most amazing hotdog I have ever tasted*. It was unreal.

I was full of energy as we walked the tarmac to the plane. The salty-smokey breeze from the Haitian mountains filled my nares one last time. I vowed to return, and would consider myself lucky to travel with Rich, Greg, Elise, and Ed again. Fr. Rick Frechette's voice echoed in my head "*Oh well, you know...anyways.*"

There is nothing like riding home in first class. Greg and I were ready in our Eagles jerseys, but none of us were ready for the frigid northeast air. As the plane landed at JFK into the lights of NYC, I teased Ed, "Welcome home, Ed! Do you think NYU is ready for you?!"

Our goodbyes were quick as we parted ways at the airport...I look forward to seeing Rich, Greg, Elise, and Ed again soon. They have each left everlasting impressions on my heart.

Best, Pam