

Atkins provides link to massive earthquake in Haiti

Written by Chris Lee

Many if not most people have heard about the massive earthquake that leveled much of Haiti Jan. 12. People and organizations from all over have come together to give what they can to help the people of Haiti.

In Holyoke, there is a different twist. Leon Atkins traveled to Haiti nearly 13 years ago in 1997. He was there to help a couple who started a hospital in Deschapelles nearly 50 miles from Port-au-Prince, or a four-hour van ride, according to Atkins.

Atkins was glad to hear the hospital wasn't hurt by the earthquake but was swamped with people in need in the waking moments after the earthquake.

Atkins spent nearly two weeks in Haiti in 1997 at the Hopital Albert Schweitzer (HAS).

Jim Carlson, a veterinarian from Julesburg, had been down to Haiti before to help train a native veterinarian. He felt the need to go back to Haiti in 1997 and asked Atkins to go along, as well as Carlson's son, Matt Brasby of Haxtun, Gilbert and Toby Anderson of Paoli and one other person.

HAS came to be because of Albert Schweitzer. He won a Nobel Peace Prize in 1953 for his field work in beginning a hospital in Lambrene, Gabon where he advocated the ethical concept "Reverence for Life," taking on the responsibility of bringing health to an impoverished area in Africa.

William Larimer Mellon, a rancher from Arizona, saw an article in 1947 in Life Magazine about Schweitzer titled "The Greatest Man in the World." After reading the article, Mellon began what would turn into a lifelong correspondence with Schweitzer. Two months later, at the age of 38, with no college degree, Mellon decided to become a doctor and open a hospital in an area with the most need, as suggested by Schweitzer.

His wife, Gwen, followed suit and enrolled as a lab technician student. During summer school vacations, they searched for a destitute corner of the Americas where they could open a hospital.

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They traveled to Haiti and came across an abandoned Standard Fruit Company complex in the desperate Artibonite Valley and their fate was settled. The hospital opened June 26, 1956 and was named Hopital Albert Schweitzer.

The hospital administers to an area of 300,000 people with no other access to health care. People frequently walk 10 hours or more to get to the hospital and many die along the way. AIDS, tuberculosis, starvation and infant malnutrition are daily affairs of the hospital.

Atkins said he helped with Mellon's cattle, painted barns, repaired gates while others worked on a chicken house. He also said they made a garden for tuberculosis patients who were released from the hospital. He said they found those patients, when released, almost always had to come back to the hospital.

Atkins said Gwen was still alive when he was there (she died in 2000) and she was an amazing lady. One of his favorite moments was eating lunch with her and the others from his group. He said it is just unbelievable what the Mellons did for the area. He said seeing the compassion she had for the Haitian people and her wisdom were extraordinary.

"They've worked so hard all those years and yet that same passion and love for these people still just showed through her," he said. "It boggled my mind what a difference two people had made."

Gwen would sit outside in front of the hospital every day at her desk under the shade of a wide tree and attend to the long line of patients.

HAS is run primarily from donations. The Haitians that work at the hospital are paid, but numerous volunteers from around the world come and offer their time, according to Atkins.

Atkins said the area where they were was one of the greener areas of Haiti. Flying over the Dominican Republic he could see miles of vegetation, but when they got over Haiti, the vegetation had been stripped.

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Atkins recalls the experience and culture

Haiti is the poorest country in the western hemisphere. Over half the population lives on less than \$1 a day. "It's bad enough with how life was, but with that kind of disaster, it's hard to imagine," Atkins said thinking about the earthquake.

Atkins questioned the crime when he was asked to go to Haiti and was told the people and the government appreciate and respect what the hospital is doing so much they don't bother them. "The government wants that hospital there," Atkins said. "They've done so much good not only fixing people up but helping the entire quality of life."

Something interesting Atkins remembered while thumbing through his photos was the maid at the Mellons' home, where he stayed. He said she hand washed all of their clothing for them and they were spotless when she was finished with them.

He couldn't recall exactly what he ate while he was there but simply said, "we had an amazing cook."

He also recalled the sound of drums at night, which he was told were drums of Haitians practicing voodoo worship. The drums would sound every night except Tuesday night.

When asked if there was one moment that touched him the most or if he had a most memorable moment, Atkins responded, "the whole thing."

With the hospital running primarily off donations, Atkins encourages those who are interested to look into helping the hospital in any way they can.

Money can be sent by mail to:

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