

## Cobourg therapist reports on trip to Haiti

COBOURG -- Therapist and adoption practitioner Sandra Webb left her Cobourg practice for a week in late October to visit Haiti as part of a Toronto organization. At the time, it had been almost 10 months since the January 2010 earthquake that left much of the country in devastation. Her arrival coincided with a disastrous outbreak of cholera. She wrote the following report on her visit.

There are so many disasters around the world. I have often thought that I would like to help, but have never had the opportunity before.

In October 2010, I was invited to go to Haiti with Mission of Tears. This Toronto based agency does humanitarian work in many countries around the world ( [www.missionoftears.ca](http://www.missionoftears.ca)). We arrived in Haiti two days after cholera broke out and left two days before the hurricane arrived to devastate Haiti once again.

I was invited -- along with a colleague and friend, Brian Nichols from Peterborough -- to look at the feasibility of setting up therapeutic programs for girls who had been sexually abused in the tent camps.

Mission of Tears supports two projects in Haiti. Our work was primarily with His Home for Children ( [www.hishomeforchildren.com](http://www.hishomeforchildren.com)), a Creche for children. The Creche has 80 children in their main home.

The children in a Creche are available for adoption. The children in an orphanage in Haiti are not available for adoption. His Home was asked by Social Services to begin a separate home for girls who have been sexually abused. There were nine girls in the home when we were there. The home will have 25 girls living there, and there were 25 more girls already on a waiting list for the home.

I have been fortunate. I have traveled to Russia on three occasions and met with judges, prosecutors, educators and orphanage personnel. In October 2009, I went to Russia to teach at a University in St. Petersburg. Three colleagues and I taught and did workshops about play therapy, attachment-based therapy and adoption at a conference. I traveled to China and visited orphanages there.

In Haiti, our goal was to set up therapeutic programs and return to support the staff in implementing the programs. Unfortunately, we decided that the staff didn't have the experience or resources to follow through with the programs between our visits. At this point, Haitian energy is focused on the basics -food, shelter and safety.

Last year, a school in Cobourg made pins shaped like houses to raise money for Haiti. When I went to Haiti I took the pin I had bought that was made by Katelyn S. I wore the pin while I was in Haiti, and told the



A child and his Izzy doll. Cobourg therapist Sandra Webb is seen with a young Haitian earthquake survivor and the Izzy doll she gave him. These knitted dolls were created for her trip by Cobourg resident Sheila Johnson.

people I met that this pin had been made by a student in Cobourg to raise funds for Haiti. I was proud that Cobourg had been a part of supporting Haiti.

It was amazing to be in Haiti and feel this student's contribution as I experienced the spirit of the Haitian people. I felt humbled and honoured to have connected the work of this one school with the country that the students wanted to help by creating this pin.

I also took along Izzy dolls knitted by Sheila Johnson of Cobourg. I have also taken Izzy dolls to Russia and China. It is always fun to watch the delight on the faces of the children as they receive these dolls.

At the orphanage, I worried about giving the dolls and not having enough for all of the children, but it wasn't a problem. One child who had received a doll would come with another child by the hand to ask for a doll for their friend or a younger child. It warmed my heart, made me teary and made me smile as the children hugged the dolls and walked away with a smile on their faces. I felt so happy for Sheila Johnson. She wasn't there to see the joy, but I got to be the witness to how her little Izzy dolls gave a little delight to the children of Haiti.

I also gave Izzy dolls to a mother, father and two older siblings (a girl of about 17 and a boy of about 12) who were visiting their two younger children at the Creche. Their little girl of about 18 months and their little boy of about three and a half were to be adopted. The family had traveled from the mountains to visit for the afternoon.

The family sat in the courtyard chatting while the other children of the orphanage played around them. The joy on the parents' faces as they talked to and hugged their children was precious to watch. These parents had decided that they wanted their youngest children to have the opportunity of a better life outside of Haiti.

Perhaps as the years go by and these siblings are separated -two in Haiti and two in the United States -the dolls will connect them to each other as they remember their visit in that courtyard of His Home for Children.

I also gave out Izzy dolls in a small village outside of Port au Prince. I felt so powerless as I met the people of this village. They were so poor and so welcoming and curious about these strangers in their village. Before we left, I gave the Izzy dolls to an elderly man. I couldn't distribute the dolls myself, because there were too many children. I left it to the wisdom of this elder in the village.

On the way back, I gave an Izzy doll to a little boy in the truck. His head had been burned when his brother lit fire to the mattress he was sleeping on. The boy took the doll. He checked to see if it made noise, and looked a little disappointed that it didn't. A few minutes later, he was playing with the doll and pretending that it could make beeping noises.



Cobourg therapist Sandra Webb does play therapy with a group of young earthquake survivors on a recent trip to Haiti.

We couldn't converse because I didn't speak Haitian, but we talked in the universal language of children as he used his imagination. This little boy of about six was playful, and we laughed together as he tried to fool me into believing the doll was making sounds. The Izzy doll brought some lightness, joy and connectedness to this little one's life.

I feel blessed to have gone to Haiti, to see and experience the tent cities, the rubble in the streets and the houses that have still not been rebuilt. I also saw the pride and joy in a people who have had more poverty, hunger and pain that I or most people I know will ever experience. I hope to return, so that I can contribute some small part to helping the children of Haiti.

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