



Irene Flanagan, claims examiner/customer service representative for Christian Brothers Health Management Services for Religious, spent her vacation this past March on a Caribbean island. What makes her vacation story unique is that it wasn't the typical vacation in paradise one may envision, but a volunteer mission trip to the earthquake ridden Republic of Haiti.

The Spirit of Giving

Always wanting to take part in a mission trip, Flanagan didn't believe she had the particular skills needed, "I'm not good at building, I'm not going to be an earth mover with construction equipment, and I'm not a medical doctor or nurse," she explained, "but to use my skills as a mom was something I could definitely do." Her call to help the less fortunate came to fruition when she was approached by a fellow church member and asked to participate in a mission trip to Haiti on behalf of The Global Orphan Project. The Global Orphan Project is a nonprofit organization that provides love, care, and support for orphaned and abandoned children living in impoverished countries. The focus of the organization is to assist local churches in caring for children in those communities.



Photo courtesy of Randall Studio.



Having raised two sons, Flanagan's mind was made up quickly and she knew this mission was something she could successfully do by utilizing her skills as a mother.

Although her two sons weren't concerned with safety issues because she was traveling with a group, they were concerned about her exposure to disease. But knowing why she was going, they proudly sent her off with a nod of approval.

Flanagan set off for Haiti with 11 other people to deliver some much needed tender loving care. The group arrived safely at the Port-au-Prince airport amid chaos and confusion, which turned out to be the biggest challenge of the trip. "People speaking Creole were trying to push you into lines and you didn't know where you were going, it was very confusing," remembers Flanagan, "they just throw the luggage into a pile in the middle of a warehouse and you have to try to locate it. Once you find your luggage, they try to get you into taxis, and you're thinking, 'No no, wait a minute now!'" Once the group located their mission guide they safely boarded a bus bound for Eben Ezer children's village located in the countryside outside of Port-au-Prince, where they remained for the duration of the trip.

Having been warned to prepare herself for culture shock, Flanagan quickly discovered reality to be far worse than anything she could have imagined. "Although I am very happy I went and glad I had the opportunity to love and hold the kids, my visual and olfactory senses were just overwhelmed," Flanagan continued, "the way people were trying to live everyday is beyond deplorable. They have virtually nothing. You saw tent cities for as far as the eye could see. There was just rubble, concrete, and rock everywhere, it was beyond shocking. Obviously, they didn't get people out of the buildings in time and the smell of decomposing bodies and trash was just so heavy and bad in some areas."

To learn more about The Global Orphan Project, visit their website at theglobalorphanproject.org.

The orphanage provides care to 120 children, some of whom were orphaned by the earthquake, others as the result of poverty. The children are well cared for and provided generous portions of food twice a day. "They loved to sing, and would always have tremendous smiles on their faces," Flanagan fondly remembers. "But you could see through the smiles to the pain in their eyes, and know the innocence just isn't there anymore." She goes on to say, "the children still found time to sing and rejoice though, and run around and play. They were just wonderful kids who craved physical touch."

While in Port-au-Prince, Flanagan had the opportunity to attend a Sunday church service. The service took place under a blue tarp because the church had been completely destroyed in the earthquake. She described the service as very inspirational, "I was surrounded by devastation and poverty, and yet so many of these people showed up wearing their very best, and they knew how to worship. The Haitians can teach us a few things on how to worship. We have everything, and yet we don't know how to thank God. Most of these people have nothing, and they were on their hands and knees thanking Him for

what they do have. That was very inspirational, very moving, and something to definitely learn from."

Flanagan summed up her trip as heartbreaking and life-changing. Other than the rebuilding of orphanages and clothing donations, there was no evidence of money being spent on clean up or rebuilding. She said, "I think God definitely opened my eyes to really show me what need is. As far as I'm concerned, each one of us should go face down on the floor every day and thank God for where we are because there are other places in the world that are just so hard off." She added, "you know you don't need half the things you think you need, as long as you have people around you who love and support you. After that you can pretty much make it through anything. That's basically what these Haitians are doing."

Despite all the tears and emotions, Flanagan would return to Haiti in a heartbeat, "an experience like that changes your life. Haiti is not just a place for me now; there are people and faces I know there." Pulled by the desire to do more, she is contemplating a return trip in either November or December of this year. ☀

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