

COS ALUMNUS RETURNS TO HAITI OFFERING MEDICAL HELP AND DESIRE TO SERVE

Alison Smith (biological sciences, chemistry '07) already had a connection with Haiti before a 7.0 magnitude earthquake destroyed much of the country in January. She had been to Haiti several times in recent years doing mission and relief work. But her trip back to the impoverished nation this time was with an even more urgent calling. This third-year medical and Ph.D. student at Tulane University was a member of the second team of doctors and nurses to arrive in the country four days after the quake.

"It was very difficult to see the devastation," she said. "But it was even harder to be in the U.S. and not be able to do anything about it."

During her 10-day trip, Smith kept a blog of her experiences, both tragic and hopeful. Below are excerpts from her online journal. Links to her full blog entries are found at the end of this story.

Jan. 15, 2010

(ON THE EVE OF HER DEPARTURE FROM THE U.S.)

In the aftermath of the earthquake, I don't know what to expect. I just know that I want to be there with the people to help shoulder this enormous burden. To work, to cry, to mourn with the Haitian people . . . We will try to treat as many people as we can. I am anxious about what we will face but ready to meet the challenges that lie ahead.

Smith, who intends to pursue a specialty in critical care, worked 12-hour days triaging patients and assisting emergency physicians outside the main hospital in Port-au-Prince. After several days, medical personnel from other nations began arriving.

Jan. 19, 2010

I was trying to organize the people outside the door to the hospital when a man came running up and placed a baby in my arms. The child had just been pulled from beneath the rubble of a collapsed building. I rushed to clean all the debris off her and get her some oral rehydration solution. She started to come around and began to cough and wake up. We were able to find her mother, and she stayed with her and fed her until she was strong enough to leave the hospital. We learned her name was Stacy. She was a bright light of hope amidst all the suffering and death.

Smith said the majority of people brought to the hospital had broken bones or infections. Amputations occurred regularly, as medical care and supplies were so scarce that patients would die if the infected limb wasn't removed.

We had a visit today by Bill Clinton, and we personally asked him to airlift a young boy we found with a severe brain injury who could be saved with proper medical attention. He promised to help us. The Army dispatched a transport team, but they refused to take him because he wasn't an American citizen.



Photos courtesy of Alison Smith





January 24, 2010

(DAY BEFORE RETURN TRIP HOME)

I need to return home soon. I am physically and emotionally exhausted from all that I have seen and done. But I really feel that I need one more day.

Smith plans to return to Haiti this spring.

"The Haitian people are so resilient," she said. "I hope from this horrible tragedy will come the attention and funding the country needs to build itself up from being the most impoverished nation in the Western Hemisphere."



Jan. 21, 2010

On Tuesday night when we departed the hospital, we were very optimistic. Supplies were coming, more doctors were arriving. We finally had organization, and we were going to be able to fly people to the USS Comfort for medical care. However, on Wednesday morning we awoke to a 5.9 magnitude aftershock centered about 35 miles from Port-au-Prince. We arrived at the hospital to find chaos. Every patient had been moved outside. People were in a panic, and we had lost any system that we had in place from all our hard work over the last few days.

We had one boy brought in who had been trapped in a house since the quake eight days ago. He was very sick with many traumatic injuries, but we were able to get him to surgery, and he is currently in stable condition. I hope he makes it through the night.

It was a day of gains and losses. We had many babies born today, but we also had many people pass away due to the extreme conditions . . . People are suffering so much, trapped in this misery. But many are finding the strength to smile and laugh. We hear women singing at night in the hospital as we work by flashlight, which always brings us a little bit of hope at the end of these very difficult and emotionally draining days.

Read Smith's blogs from Haiti at:

newsroom.mtv.com/2010/01/19/haiti-earthquake-relief/

newsroom.mtv.com/2010/01/21/haiti-aftershock/

newsroom.mtv.com/2010/01/25/sean-penn-haiti/

View riveting pictures from her trip at:

www.flickr.com/photos/46670982@N06/