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Giving back

Paramedics Jeff Jordison and Troy Cheseboro reflect on their trip to Haiti where they volunteered on a mission with the Ontario Volunteer Emergency Response Team (OVERT)

(PETERBOROUGH) There is the woman who, in desperation, tries to give away her toddler because she can no longer take care of the child.

There are the children with teeth ground down from eating dirt cookies. Then there is the expectant mother, nine months pregnant, who makes the three-hour walk down a remote mountain path to give birth.

There are many moments from their trip to Haiti that Peterborough paramedics Jeff Jordison and Troy Cheseboro will never forget.

Mr. Jordison, who works for Peterborough EMS, and Mr. Cheseboro, who works for both Peterborough and Durham EMS, spent a week in late January



Peterborough paramedics in Haiti. Peterborough paramedics Troy Cheseboro [left] Jeff Jordison [right] volunteered in Haiti in late January with a team from the Ontario Volunteer Emergency Response Team (OVERT). *Courtesy of OVERT*

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volunteering in Haiti. They were part of a five-person team that headed to Haiti with the Ontario Volunteer Emergency Response Team (OVERT). OVERT is made up of emergency service personnel, such as paramedics, firefighters and police, who volunteer their time to respond to major incidents and disasters. Glen Turpin, OVERT co-ordinator, says this trip to Haiti marked OVERT's first international deployment.

"We brought a level of care that wasn't there."

All three men agree that when they first arrived in Haiti they thought it looked like the earthquake that devastated the small Caribbean nation happened just a couple of weeks ago and not over a year ago. Mr. Turpin notes that 85 per cent of the rubble from the earthquake is still where it fell last January.

"It almost looked like there was no repair effort done whatsoever," explains Mr. Cheseboro.

At the team drove away from the airport they passed by tent cities where thousands of Haitians are still living. And now the country is dealing with a cholera outbreak.

"There were little kids and adults standing there with a bucket on the side of the road trying to have a shower," recalls Mr. Jordison.

The three men also agree that while there are many none government organizations (NGO's) working in Haiti, there is no single agency giving direction.

"No one is working together," explains Mr. Cheseboro.

"They [NGO's] all have good intentions, they do, but there are a lot of personal agenda's down there," adds Mr. Turpin.

The team spent much of their time volunteering in an area called Saint Marc, which is about two hours north of the capital Port-au-Prince

Mr. Jordison and Mr. Cheseboro focused on patient care, volunteering as part of a medical team at an orphanage and also volunteering at medical clinics. The two paramedics, who worked with a Haitian doctor, saw medical conditions ranging from people with Cholera to a 12-year-old boy with syphilis to an elderly woman with a prolapsed uterus that walked for hours to get to the clinic.

"People would come in from all walks of life with different complaints," says Mr. Cheseboro.

"The physician we worked with was amazing."

Both Peterborough and Durham EMS donated supplies for the the mission.

Mr. Jordison says there is no emergency services in Haiti. The only ambulance they saw was sitting in a pile of rubble on the side of a street.

"If you get hit on the side of the road you're on your own," says Mr. Turpin.

The team also spent time in an area in the mountains called Fond Baptiste. The community's medical clinic looks more like a shed with an old tin roof.

"They call themselves the forgotten ones," says Mr. Turpin.

Mr. Jordison says a number of people in the area were suffering from liver failure because they were drinking a mixture of rubbing alcohol and peroxide, which they thought would help cure Cholera, but was also likely drank as alcohol in religious ceremonies.

Mr. Jordison say the hardest part of the trip emotionally for him was visiting the orphanages. He recalls one orphanage in particular which was just a large shed. The older kids slept on cots while the younger children slept on the dirt floor.

All three men says they felt like the mission did make a difference, especially in the area of water purification. Members of the OVERT team brought down portable water purification units which they not only set up, but also showed the locals how to use. The team dropped of a total of 27 units, and each unit can clean 4 million litres of water. Mr. Jordison says while they didn't get to see as many patients as they would have liked, they feel like they also made a difference with their medical work.

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Caring together

"We brought a level of care that wasn't there," he says.

"It [the mission] accomplished what we wanted it to," adds Mr. Turpin.

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