

HEALTH CARE from HERE to HAITI

TWO WOMEN REACH OUT TO GIVE BACK

BY BARBARA RAVAGE

“I don't think anything prepares you for the visual impact of Port-au-Prince.” Chris Hardman is talking about the devastated capital of Haiti, the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere. She first set eyes on it in March 2008 when she arrived for a weeklong volunteer stint at a rural clinic in the mountains above the city. Also in the group of 12 volunteers was her daughter, Brooke, and Joanne Liberles, the friend who convinced Chris to go to Saint Rock.

The aptly named village is built into the mountainside less than 10 miles from Port-au-Prince. The journey up a winding, rutted road takes an hour and a half in the ancient tap-tap, a rattletrap of a truck with wooden benches and a wheezing engine. The people of the 10 villages of Haiti's Carrefour region – literally, “cross-roads” in French – walk this road, carrying laundry on their heads, down to the polluted streams in Port-au-Prince. There is no running water up the mountain, nor is there electricity.

How does a health clinic bring needed services to as many as 4000 people in this blighted area each year? According to the two women from Orleans, it takes a combination of a strong local community and the generosity of health care professionals and others from the U.S. who provide funds, expertise, and their own labor.

Joanne, 59, is a native Bostonian who came to Cape Cod in 2000, living in Magansett and Brewster before settling in Orleans in 2006. “I think I'm calmer living here. It's a good fit,” she says of her life on the Cape, but adds that she's used to more diversity and needs to get up to Boston regu-



JOANNE LIBERLES PHOTO

People walk or are carried down this mountain road in Saint Rock, Haiti, to get to the clinic. The roof of the village school is visible in the background, left.

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CHRIS HARDMAN, ORLEANS

larly for her “city fix.” Her son Joshua, a long-distance cyclist and environmentalist, lives in Portland, Oregon. A job transfer brought Joanne to the Cape to serve as general manager of Kinlin Grover. She later co-founded

Old Cape Sotheby's, where she now works part time as a sales agent. But what really motivates her is the desire to make a contribution in a very poor environment. When a friend who is a nurse at Mass General told her about Saint Rock, she decided to get involved, first by providing financial support, then on the ground and as a messenger spreading the word in her own community. She made her first weeklong visit in November 2006, and went back just before Easter 2008, with a group that included her golfing buddy, Chris Hardman.

Chris, also 59, is a breast cancer survivor, thanks in no small part to the quality medical care that is lacking in Haiti. “Sometimes there's a guilt to that,” she says. “It was the tenth anniversary since my diagnosis and that was one of the reasons I decided to go on this trip. I think a lot of us reach a point where we're very comfortable, we have very happy lives, and it is time to give back.”

Chris moved to Orleans with her husband, Jim, and their three children 12 years ago. She and Jim ran a kitchen and bath business in Williamstown. When the economy of the Berkshires went downhill, they decided to relocate to the Cape, where they'd summered since 1979. “We always wanted to retire here anyway,” Chris says. “We feel very fortunate we got here sooner.” Their daughter Brooke, an actress who lives on the Vineyard, was already in college when they moved, but Hilary entered Nauset Regional High School as a junior and James started third grade at Orleans Elementary School. “I think I was destined to live here,” Chris says. “I just feel like this is home.”

The Saint Rock Foundation was



Golf buddies Chris Hardman, left, and Joanne Liberles will be held at Captain's Golf Course in Orleans. The tournament will raise funds for medical care and supplies to Haitians in Saint Rock.



Joanne Liberles are co-organizers of the tournament and dinner. The Oct. 9 fundraiser at Brewster and proceeds will help bring relief.



JOANNE LIBERLES PHOTOS

Helping in Haiti: On the left, some of the children of Saint Rock show up at the clinic after school. On the right, Chris Hardman of Orleans takes the blood pressure of a Saint Rock resident. Blood pressure is a problem for a majority of Haitians adults.

started by Ralph Stowe, who first visited Haiti in 1981. Now retired, the former high school industrial arts teacher from Hull eventually married a Haitian woman and adopted a 12-year-old boy from an orphanage in Port-au-Prince. When he asked his sister-in-law, who lives in Saint Rock, what the community needed, she answered, "a health clinic." Ralph provided funds to set up a small clinic in a rundown one-room building. Today, it has expanded into a sturdy, weather-tight concrete-block structure with an examination room, a dentist's office, a kitchen, and a dark, windowless area that serves as both supply room and pharmacy. Two small rooms are used as dormitories for visiting volunteers, who sleep on cots under mosquito netting. During the day, the men's dorm is converted to another exam room to accommodate the large number of people who come seeking medical care.

Families begin lining up on the porch three or four hours before the clinic opens at 8 a.m., many having walked for as long as five hours to get there.

The clinic has a part-time staff consisting of a doctor, a nurse, a nurse's aide, and a dentist, supplemented by weeklong visits by health care professionals, most of them from Mass General Hospital, who volunteer their time. Along with their expertise, they bring medical supplies and prescription drugs.

Before they left for Haiti, Chris and Joanne's group splurged at Sam's Club and Costco on Gatorade by the gallon, 1500 power bars, vacuum bags

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of tuna, box after box of bandages, prenatal vitamins, books, clothing, and more. American Airlines waived the weight restrictions to permit each passenger two huge suitcases filled to bursting. Their first task on arrival was to unpack the supplies, stock shelves, and organize the pharmacy, which they did in pitch darkness, with one of the volunteers wearing a miner's light.

In the morning, before the clinic opened, Chris and Joanne held educational sessions with mothers waiting on the porch. Using material provided by UNICEF and with the help of two young men from the community who translated into Creole, they talked about the importance of breastfeeding children as long as possible and the need for rehydration for those suffering the all-too common scourge of diarrhea.

Quickhits

Health help for Haiti

"Chip In For Haiti" Charity

Tournament

Oct. 9

Captains Golf Course, Brewster Limited to first 100 registrants; dinner reservations must be made by Oct. 1.

To register or to volunteer to help out, e-mail: chipinforhaiti@gmail.com

Saint Rock Haiti Foundation

To learn more about the foundation, make a tax-deductible donation, or find out other ways to help visit:

www.SaintRock.org

During clinic hours, the non-medical volunteers assisted the nurses, weighing patients and taking vital signs. Most patients are severely underweight, many of the babies are developmentally delayed because of malnutrition, and high blood pressure is epidemic among the adults. The volunteers counted pills, bagged vitamins, mixed re-hydration fluids, and did triage to ensure those in greatest need were given care as soon as possible. "We saw a lot of very sick people," Joanne says. There was the woman who was having a miscarriage, the 24-year-old man with a 105-degree fever, and the woman whose breast was blackened with an invasive cancer that had gone untreated for two years. And then there was the

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Haiti

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little boy covered with scabies who was having seizures.

"It was apparent that we couldn't help this baby," Chris recalls. They were able to take care of his immediate need, which was for re-hydration fluid, but afterwards Chris asked the nurse what would happen to him. "Her eyes filled up and she said, 'We're probably not going to see him here again.' That's the heartbreak of the reality in Haiti. I think we did a lot of good, but it's just scratching the surface."

Part of that good is an ongoing effort to get pregnant and lactating women to come for preventive health visits. The babies are the healthiest, Chris points out, because they are breastfed, but all too often, mothers go without food themselves in order to feed their children. "Some come to the clinic for the opportunity to get a little food, because these are people who can't rely on getting even one meal a day," Joanne says. The children, universally well-behaved, are dressed in their Sunday best. Those who are able, play with Frisbies, jacks, and other toys the Americans brought. Others sit patiently – for hours and hours – until it's their turn to be seen.

If the first impression is of noise, smells, the chaos of poverty – "Port-au-Prince is loud, it's steamy, there's garbage everywhere, either burning or floating in what used to be streams," says Joanne – the second one is how lovely the people are. Saint Rock is a close-knit community that puts its children first. "It makes you think: This is what life is supposed to be, relationships with families, and love. That's what I was struck by," says Chris.

The efforts of the Saint Rock Foundation extend beyond the clinic. There is no public education in Haiti, which has a literacy rate of only 53 percent. Families who have nothing must pay to send their children to school. There are 80 children enrolled in the village school, and Chris, her husband, Joanne, and another friend are paying the salaries of the principal and seven teachers for this year so the school can remain open. "One of our dreams is to get a lunch program into the school, and we think that's achievable," says Joanne.

Tax-deductible donations to the

Saint Rock Foundation may be earmarked for specific projects or made to the general fund. Administrative costs are kept to a minimum, so 94 cents out of every dollar donated goes to direct services to the people of Saint Rock. Volunteers pay their own airfare and a small amount to cover room and board during their stay. One of the most pressing needs is for a four-wheel-drive vehicle to transport people to the hospital in Port-au-Prince. Now, Joanne says, people who require hospitalization and are too ill to walk are carried down the mountain on a litter.

Golf brought Joanne and Chris together and they are hoping to use it to raise funds for the clinic and other community services in Saint Rock. On October 9, Captains Golf Course in Brewster will host "Chip in for Haiti," a charity tournament followed by a dinner for golfers and non-golfers alike. The tournament is limited to the first 100 registrants, but any number can reserve a place at the dinner. There will be prizes, a raffle, and a sale of Haitian art. Volunteers are needed for a variety of tasks before and during the event, so there are many opportunities to chip in. The goal is to raise \$10,000, but they hope to exceed that.

As for Saint Rock itself, the two friends have clearly found a mission. Joanne says, "I feel like I'm always going to go back." Chris concurs: "It's a lifetime commitment."

About the author

Barbara Ravage moved to Cape Cod from her native New York City in 2000, after the youngest of her children went off to college. She considers heavy doses of ocean air and Cape light the best cure for empty nest syndrome. A graduate of Barnard College, she is the author of nine books, including a biography of Rachel Carson for middle-school students and "Burn Unit: Saving Lives After the Flames," which explores the history and science of burn treatment. She balances her writing life with yoga, karate, and pottery. After years of making do with two summer weeks on the Cape, her favorite part about living here is that she's already home.