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Mass. native recounts Haiti aftermath, relief efforts

By: **Matt Rocheleau and Alexandra Roche** | January 31, 2010 |

He heard initial reports that around 5,000 were dead in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, but within moments of driving into Haiti's capital the next morning and seeing the aftermath firsthand, Peter Kapiloff knew those estimates were not even close.

Enette Dumerin holds her twins, Carlebre Dumerin and Jeff Dumerin, 3, right, in a C-17 on route from Haiti to Orlando, Fla. on Jan. 17. (Erika Schultz/Seattle Times/MCT)

Around 17 hours after the city was devastated by a magnitude-7 earthquake, thousands of bodies lay in the streets, roughly one-third of the city's buildings were completely destroyed, panic had set in and "the city was completely lawless," Kapiloff told members of the campus community during his visit to the University of Massachusetts on Friday evening.

On Jan. 29, UMass' Student Alumni Association hosted guest lecturer Kapiloff, who came to share what he witnessed on that day in Haiti.

When Kapiloff took to the podium in UMass' Memorial Hall, he explained to the gathered crowd that he had gone to Haiti as a part of an organization he was involved in when he lived in Boston.

In his efforts to provide aid over the several days following the earthquake, the 27-year-old Williamstown, Mass., native said he constantly feared for his life as scarce food and water made riots and looting a frequent occurrence. He was nearly robbed at gun point, and aftershocks made search-and-rescue efforts treacherous, he said. Kapiloff plans to return to Haiti next week with more supplies and money.

"Port-au-Prince had never seen anything like this before. The stuff I saw there I'll never forget – the injuries, the smell, really everything," he said.

When the quake struck shortly before 5 p.m. on Jan. 12, Kapiloff was staying in Cap-Haïtien on Haiti's northern coast approximately 80 miles from the capital, but he said he was supposed to be in Port-au-Prince. Earlier that day, his flight to Port-au-Prince was cancelled because of heavy rains, and Kapiloff later saw that the house he would have been staying in had been reduced to a pile of rubble.

He said the earthquake could be felt in northern Haiti, but "no one in Cap-Haïtien thought anything of it."

In September 2009, Kapiloff said he left a well-paying finance job in Boston to do something "more

meaningful.

He volunteered at the Hope for the Children of Haiti Orphanage (HFC) for two-and-a-half months in Bolosse, located in Port-au-Prince. The program is funded by the U.S., and pays for the children to go to school because many people in Haiti cannot afford to send their children to school on their own.

So, when Kapiloff arrived in Port-au-Prince, his main focus was ensuring the safety of the students he calls "my children." And Kapiloff could not have been more thankful to learn all 56 of them were uninjured.

"I know that God put his hand on them," he said. "They're the lucky ones."

However, the facility the children live in was damaged, and concerns over the evacuated building's stability forced students and HFC staff to live on an outdoor basketball court. When the director of the orphanage wanted to move the children back inside, other Haitians were furious. Some people came down and said if the children were sleeping in the building then they were too, so the director decided to keep the kids outside. That night, Kapiloff left the orphanage because he realized he needed to try to get more help for the kids.

"There's going to be a lot of people living outside in Port-au-Prince for a long time," Kapiloff said.

Prior to the destruction, Haiti was the Western Hemisphere's poorest nation. The earthquake killed an estimated 150,000 and put 1.5 million people – desperate for food, drinkable water and medical attention – out onto the streets that, according to Kapiloff, have little to no police presence.

"People were getting aggressive taking what they wanted," he said.

While trying to bring food and clean water back to HFC, Kapiloff said a Haitian man put a revolver to his stomach and told Kapiloff in Creole, "'Don't be foolish, friend. This [food and water] is for me."

Kapiloff said an elderly Haitian man then began screaming at the man with the gun, grabbed Kapiloff's belongings and tossed them back to Kapiloff while telling him, "'You're a fool. What are you doing here? There's a reason no Americans are down here right now.'"

With buildings collapsing around them as they dug, Kapiloff said he helped in search efforts, finding one person alive and several others dead. He also helped treat dozens of injured before HFC ran out of medical supplies.

The missionary that Kapiloff was residing in housed about 1,500 people. People were trapped inside many of the crumbling buildings. Kapiloff said he tried to get people to help him dig in search of survivors. Out of 1,500-2,000 people, only two or three would help him dig. Kapiloff added that Grace Children's Hospital also collapsed, leaving no survivors. There were so many dead bodies in the road that they needed mass graves to get rid of them all. The stench of the bodies filled the air. Trucks came to pick up the bodies and carry them to these graves.

Kapiloff said he stuck out there as an American, which made him a target to be robbed. So he decided his presence at HFC would do more harm than good.

Trying to find a way back to Massachusetts, he went to the city's airport where U.S. military, doctors and journalists already arrived.

Kapiloff said he approached a well-known female journalist and told her about video footage he took while riding around Port-au-Prince the morning after the earthquake. He offered her the video, pictures and interviews with himself and people he knew in Port-au-Prince, in exchange for having her help get three doctors out to the children at HFC.

The journalist, who Kapiloff declined to name or disclose the publication she works for, offered him money instead, he said.

"I was so angry with her. I told her I don't want money for the pictures, I want doctors," he said.

Despite such frustrations, Kapiloff said he is thankful and impressed by the amount of aid being delivered by Americans.

"There are a lot of problems, a lot of problems in Port-au-Prince right now, but I think they've held up better than the U.S. military had expected," he said. "One thing I'll never forget is all night long, the Haitians were singing hymns. It amazed me how positive they could be in the situation they were in," he added later.

One of the biggest problems Haiti faces now is an extreme shortage of medical supplies, Kapiloff said. There are only a few places where people can be treated, and due to the high numbers of people living with HIV/AIDS, gloves or any other supplies could not be reused. Eventually, the place where Kapiloff was helping ran out of supplies. Children were being treated first, and since there were not enough supplies to go around, many of the other injured people were given Tylenol and Advil for severe burns and breaks. The U.S. responded quickly to the earthquake, and soon enough they were controlling the operations at the airport. Kapiloff saw that the military was surprised when they arrived.

Kapiloff added that the airport was assisting people medically as well, but many Haitians either did not know about this or were not strong enough to make it to the airport for help.

Since returning several days ago, Kapiloff has been telling his tale and looking to find any support he can

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for the thousands left struggling to survive in Haiti.

"Even if I don't raise a lot of money [on my own], there's enough positive that can come from you hearing about it," he told the crowd.

He said he will leave again for Haiti this coming Friday, but does not know how long he will stay for.

"As long as those kids are on the street, we'll get them inside. We'll do whatever we have to do to get them inside," said Kapiloff.

Despite all the relief efforts, Kapiloff said that the children at the orphanage are still sleeping on the streets. The best thing that people outside of Haiti can do to help, according to Kapiloff, is to donate money for medical supplies, food and clean water.

Kapiloff concluded, "We need a lot of help. It's not going to be a month or two, it's not going to be a year or two, these people's lives were destroyed by this earthquake, and rebuilding them is going to be a long, expensive and emotionally demanding process. I just want people to know what's going on down there, and to keep them in your prayers."

Donations for the Hope for the Children of Haiti orphanage and school can be made online at www.hfchaiti.org. Donations to help relief efforts in Haiti can also be addressed to Kapiloff's church, "Haiti Relief/PK," Community Bible Church, 160 Bridges Rd., Williamstown, Mass., 01267.

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