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## Aid workers help victims one at a time

*In the middle of chaos, lives are being saved*

by Laura Walz | [editor@prpeak.com](mailto:editor@prpeak.com)

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Most Canadians observed the devastation a 7.2 magnitude earthquake wreaked in Haiti through television, radio or newspaper reports. Two Powell River men experienced the horror on the ground.

Brian Skrodolis and Andy Perkonig volunteered in Haiti through GAIN (Global Aid Network), a worldwide humanitarian relief and development organization. Skrodolis was a disaster relief project manager in Haiti from January 19 to March 6. Perkonig was part of a medical team that arrived in Haiti on February 18 and left on February 28.

Skrodolis arrived in Haiti just seven days after the earthquake. "You couldn't even say it was organized chaos," he said. "It was just chaos when I first arrived."

Skrodolis is in the City of Powell River's relief labour pool. Since there is little work in the winter, he has been volunteering with GAIN and had previously been in Africa where he worked on water drilling projects.

He arrived in Haiti just when officials were allowing non-military planes to land. "It was pretty raw," he said. "There was the stench of dead bodies. None of the buildings had been cleared yet. Some of the buildings had hundreds and hundreds of people in them."

In the middle of the chaos, lives were being saved, though, Skrodolis said. "I saw a lot of people die, but I also saw a lot of people who were saved. Had not organizations gone in there, they wouldn't have been saved."

If aid to Haiti doesn't continue, there will be hundreds of thousands more people dead, Skrodolis said. Many people in Port-au-Prince are living in makeshift shelters, called IDP (Internally Displaced People) camps. One IDP camp on 12 acres has 50,000 people in it, Skrodolis said. "They have no room. For the first five weeks, there were no port-a-potties, nothing, no latrines. What were the people doing? They were defecating all around their tents." He described the tents as sticks in the ground with sheets on them.

Now that the rains have started, the feces is getting mixed in where

everyone is sleeping, Skrodolis said. "The next thing is the disease that follows. There's huge desperation right now for decent accommodations for people to sleep in, whether it's through semi-permanent sleeping dwellings or quality tents. But that will only help up to hurricane season, which is in a month and a half."

Perkonig's team, which included a surgeon, four general practitioners, several nurses, including pediatric nurses, and two paramedics, worked in Port-au-Prince. "Nothing could prepare us for what we saw," Perkonig said. "It's just unbelievable. The official death toll is at over 210,000 people. They figure it's more like 400,000 people. Many thousands are still buried in the rubble. When you get into ground zero, the areas that were hardest hit, like Chamfor and Jacmel, it was just unbelievable. There was nothing standing."

One half of Perkonig's team went into the IDP camps. The other half worked in a clinic that they set up in Chamfor.

The team brought 2,800 pounds of medical supplies which had been donated. Perkonig himself brought four large bags of medical supplies which had been donated by people in Powell River. "In five days we treated over 2,500 people," Perkonig said. "Every single day we had little ones brought in that were within an hour of dying."

It's important to Perkonig to keep the awareness up of the great ongoing need in Haiti. "Malaria, dengue fever, tuberculosis, all that is on the rise and they have no protection. They have nothing."

Aid in the way of food has been mostly rice, said Skrodolis, so people are not receiving proper proteins. "Even though they're getting food to fill their stomachs, they're not getting anything to feed their bodies," he said. "They're still malnourished."


Many of the aid workers, doctors, nurses, soldiers and Haitian police officers, were traumatized by what they witnessed, Skrodolis said. "It was brutal, seeing life snuffed out that way, torn bodies, babies dying, people disfigured and having to have amputations, huge infections, huge wounds, crush injuries, it was just unbelievable."

Skrodolis said the situation is like a huge, insurmountable mountain. An experience he had in Africa helped him put that mountain and the task at hand in perspective. "I saw people working on a huge pile of earth with shovels. They didn't have a wheelbarrow, so they carried one shovel load at a time and dumped it into another area. The pile was the size of a house."

"I thought, 'That's insane. Do you know how long that's going to take them? Forget it. That will never get done.' We came back two days later and the whole pile was already moved over to where they wanted it. By one shovelful at a time."

In Haiti, workers are saving one person at a time, Skrodolis said. "That's all we can do, worry about what's in front of us, what can we do. All of a sudden, you're seeing a mountain slowly getting moved. You're seeing these lives getting improved. By the time I left I saw a noticeable improvement in the lifestyles of people in the IDP camps. The last week I was there, they started putting port-a-potties in."

Skrodolis said he would go back to Haiti and Perkonig is making preparations to return in May.



**AID AND SUPPORT:** Brian Skrodolis was in Haiti for six weeks volunteering as a disaster relief project manager with GAIN (Global Aid Network). Another volunteer in Haiti was Judy Davies, a trauma counsellor.

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