

HOPE FOR HAITI

Two charities inspire optimism

BY VIRGINIA MORGAN

D"Don't write that same old story about how pathetic we are!" says Nadege, a young Haitian businesswoman working in New York City. "That's not my family! I never see that kind of poverty—people sitting on garbage, eating dirt because they're so hungry. That's not my Haiti." But Nadege's youthful memories of her homeland are a lifetime away from the realities of existence in present-day Haiti. In fact, the two could not be more different.

Haiti defies pat analysts. It did not begin as a land of sorrow. In the Pétionville district and surrounding hills, the upper class of Port-au-Prince still sip cool drinks in filigree mansions half-hidden by bougainvillea shrubs. From their elegant verandas, they look down on a country once coveted as the "Pearl of the Indies," the richest colony in the Americas. The city is gorgeous by night. Light of day, however, can reveal cruel privation, miracles, and humor—all on the same street.

Shoulder to impossibly bony shoulder, two beggars in the slums of La Saline gaze in unison at the perfect blue of the Caribbean Sea below. It seems impossible these specters could still be breathing. Behind them, a dusty cardboard shack is decorated with pink plastic flowers and pretty bits of cloth. A ruby-red bus charges by, its yellow fringe flying. Hand-lettered prayers along its sides beseech God's protection. Skinny dogs and a man with a briefcase, caught off guard, scatter for their lives. Nearby, a group of children, their legs bowed by rickets, laugh in delight. Beside them, open trash pits burn.

But these are courageous, resilient people. In even the worst slums, Haitians create thrilling works of art with sculpture, painting, music, and dance. Since 1988, the AIDS epidemic, four catastrophic hurricanes, three floods comparable to our Katrina, armed invasions, and embargoes have devastated every pillar of normal national life, from bridges to schools to food crops.

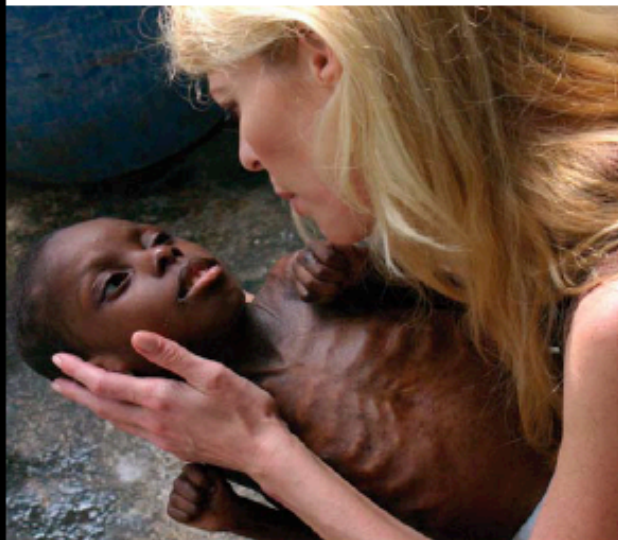
The consequence? Most children will not celebrate a fifth birthday; their parents won't survive to see 50. Tuberculosis, malaria, mumps, measles, whooping cough, cholera, and dysentery rob Haiti's children of



(left) a typical market day in Haiti

(below) A Haitian woman in front of her shack home. Photographs courtesy Adam Jones





their future. With more than half the country living on less than \$1 per day, life for ordinary Haitians is worse now in every respect, save politics, than it was 40 years ago.

More maddening still is the striking gap between intention and results: In March, at Cap-Haïtien, the country's second-largest city, 40,000 pounds of beans rotted while waiting to clear customs and be dispersed to throngs of hungry people. Hundreds more ships, in port since November, were similarly trapped in tropical heat. Why? In a well-intentioned bid to control drug smuggling and generate income for the cash-strapped government, the United States and the World Bank tied Haiti's economic aid to the inspection of all ships entering its ports.



Photograph courtesy Mercy and Sharing Foundation

But Haiti could not afford new inspectors, so the wheels of fate turned: Shippers out of Miami canceled deliveries by another 200 ships, while charities, unable to afford bribes to circumvent the blockade—yes, money can find a way—stopped donations. Result? Haiti's powerless have no option but to eat pies made from dirt and hope—or simply die.

However, there are those who are not thwarted by embargoes and are determinedly making miracles daily for Haiti.

Susan Scott Krabacher, a former *Playboy* centerfold, first visited the abandoned-infants unit at the Hôpital Général, a public hospital in the slums of Cité Soleil, in 1994. "That changed me," she says. "I had never seen so much pain."

In that moment, she discovered her life's mission. Haitians were starving from a U.S./U.N.-sponsored embargo. Doctors and nurses at the ward were caring for over 200 infants in a unit meant for 20. They were so overwhelmed, Krabacher recalls, that live infants "shared cribs with the dead," and "the heads of some of the babies were actually growing around the iron bars of the cribs because the children hadn't moved in so long."

With her husband, Aspen, Colorado, attorney Joe Krabacher, Susan started the Mercy and Sharing Foundation (MSF). She sold her own businesses, and the couple spent \$340,000 in those first years. MSF now cares for 3,000 children with a staff of 300. The operation includes two orphanages, three schools, a cancer-screening center, a meals program, an abandoned-infants program, and plans for a trade

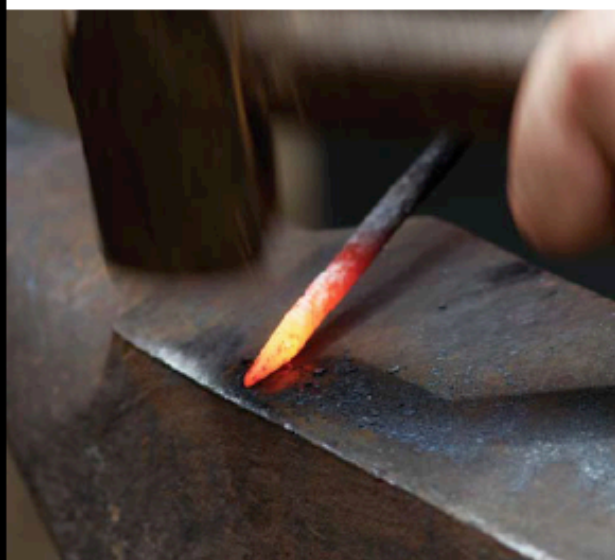
school for the handicapped. In 2004, the People's Princess Foundation, continuing Princess Diana's work, honored Krabacher with its Rose Award for her efforts in Haiti.

And as the children suffered, so did the artisans. But once more, love and determination would step in to make a difference.

Haiti's artists and craftsmen, always marginal in a fragile economy, were also badly hit by that embargo. Tourists could not enter—therefore, no sales; art could not be exported—thus, no income. Enter American expatriates Lucy Mott Lee and GINETTE TAGGART, artists and writers themselves. The situation was so dire, Lee noted, that the term "starving artist" was raised to a level unimaginable in the United States. Determined to save these artists and their families, Taggart and Lee scoured the countryside, buying every piece of art they could. That was the easy part.

Then, these "girl pirates of the Caribbean" smuggled their precious cargo out of Haiti on a friend's 60-foot sailboat. On six different trips, they sped past the embargo gunboats to land at a chic resort in Turks and Caicos. There, they set up La Maison Creole (now part of the Ten Thousand Villages fair-trade organization) where they sold the art, and still do, in the town of Providenciales. Hundreds of artists, their wives, and children were saved. Now there are several great Haitian art cooperatives. ☺

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The AIDS epidemic, hurricanes, floods, armed invasions, and embargoes have devastated every pillar of normal life.”



Haitian art is always carefully hand-crafted, and is rich in culture and tradition.

To learn more
or to contribute,
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