

READING EAGLE

The newspaper of record for Reading and Berks County, Pa.

Global Rescue Rescues Missionaries From Haiti After U.S. Embassy Fails To Help Armed Rescuers Whisk Berks Missionaries Out Of Haiti

By Greta Cuyler | March 2, 2010



A missionary group from the Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church was providing humanitarian assistance to the Haitian people prior to the earthquake. In its aftermath, they were stranded without food, water or fuel. On January 17, Global Rescue deployed to their location, provided security and supplies and evacuated them out of the country.

Six armed men whisked a group of Berks County missionaries out of Haiti over concerns for their safety following last week's devastating earthquake.

following two days of rest in Santa Domingo, Dominican Republic, the group of 14 people from Christ (Mertz) Evangelical Lutheran Church in Dryville, near Fleetwood, returned home Tuesday night.

"We wanted to come home to our families, but we also wanted to stay and help," said Sara J. Trupp, 19, of Oley. The group was in Haiti for nearly a week to do missionary work at a church and orphanage. The earthquake struck Jan. 12, a few days after they arrived.

The group's travel insurance company, Brotherhood Mutual, hired employees of Global Rescue to get the group out of Haiti. The men arrived at the compound in the town of Croix des Bouquets on Saturday night, each armed with automatic weapons, said Courtney Renshaw, 20, who is a junior at Alvernia University.

One of the men was an ex-Navy SEAL. Two others were former Green Berets. One didn't speak English, Renshaw said. On Sunday morning at 5, the men drove the group in a four-vehicle caravan to the nearby Port-au-Prince airport. They boarded the first charter plane out of Haiti, Renshaw said.

Each was allowed to take only a small bag of belongings. The rest of their luggage either was left behind or will be shipped back in a few months. Megan S. Trupp, 21, Sara's sister, said she boarded the plane with two days worth of clothes, toothpaste, a camera and a journal in her backpack.

"We were told we're 'blancs' or foreigners," said Lauren Williams, 20, another Oley resident and a student at Shippensburg University. "That means we have wealth. So even though the Haitians know we're helping them, they also know we have the money to come down there."

The group first tried to get help to leave Haiti through the U.S. Embassy just outside of Port-au-Prince. But when they arrived at the embassy, they couldn't even get inside, Renshaw said. A guard told them the embassy had taken in 100 Americans who were staying inside, she said. A line of more than 100 people

extended beyond the embassy gates.

They were told that if they had a safe place to stay, they should return to it. The group went back to the compound. Shortly afterward, arrangements were made with the insurance company to return them to safety.

Helping orphans

The group spent the first several days after the earthquake assisting a nearby orphanage - bringing food and water and playing with the children. Port-au-Prince was the hardest hit, Renshaw said. The quake's epicenter was about 10 miles southwest of the capital.

"The downtown was 100 times worse than us," she said of Croix des Bouquets, which is about 8 miles from the capital. The first night, the group slept outside. The next night they returned inside, but quickly fled outdoors as aftershocks hit. The group could hear people singing throughout the first night, a comforting sound in the midst of chaos.

"After every aftershock, the singing just got louder," Williams said. Although they were largely isolated from the devastation in Port-au-Prince, they did see plenty of footage on the Internet when they hooked up an emergency generator for about four hours a day.

"We never saw the disaster that you saw on TV," Williams said. The group had to secure the compound where they were staying after portions of a 12-foot-tall exterior brick wall fell, said Courtney's father, Patrick Renshaw.

While the women held flashlights, the three males on the trip - Patrick, 48, Joshua Christman, 21, and Aaron Messersmith, 16 - strung barbed wire 4 feet high to keep looters out.

Patrick Renshaw, the compound's gardener and two neighbors stayed up during the night of the quake to keep guard while the others slept. They were armed with a machete and hammers.

The men remained on guard through Thursday night, Patrick Renshaw said. "I probably didn't sleep until Friday," Patrick Renshaw said. "When we got to the Dominican Republic (on Sunday) my body hit the bed and I was out."

Haitian hospitality

Before the group left, they experienced the hospitality of the Haitians. People they had met on their trip walked hours to see them just to make sure they were all right, Courtney Renshaw said.

A man named Jarrel Carte, who played the accordion for the church service, walked for six hours, through the debris-strewn streets of Port-au-Prince to check on the group's safety, she said.

Carte told the group the homes in his neighborhood were either damaged or gone and about 500 people were gathered together to live communally. The missionaries gave him about 4 pounds of rice, and the snacks that they had. Christman gave Carte his backpack to carry the supplies. Several members of the group said they hope to return to Haiti. "I could see myself and Josh (Christman) going back again within a year," Patrick Renshaw said.

Christman agreed.

"They need that much more help now," he said.

Contact Greta Cuyler: 610-371-5042 or gcuyler@readingeagle.com.