

Quake just a bigger reason to stay, says local midwife in Haiti

24-year-old from Devon rejects evacuation for chance to help survivors

BY BEN GELINAS, EDMONTON JOURNAL JANUARY 17, 2010



Sarah Wallace, a 24-year-old midwife from Devon, holds up baby Mirlanda, a malnourished baby who she cared for in Haiti. Mirlanda and her mother are missing.

Photograph by: Supplied, edmontonjournal.com

As Canadians are urged to head toward the embassy in Port-au-Prince and evacuate earthquake-ravaged Haiti, Devon-raised Sarah Wallace will stay amid the chaos in an isolated city to the south and search for survivors.

Wallace moved to the port city of Jacmel in 2008 to work as a midwife and establish a registered charity, called [Olive Tree Projects](#).

The city of 40,000 is her home now, and though devastation in the country's capital dominates headlines, Jacmel is likewise in shambles.

Many people are dead. Many more are struggling to survive.

"Haiti needs help and that's why I moved here," says Wallace, 24.

"I wanted to help them before the earthquake. Now they need the help even more. Why would I stop now?"

The Journal spoke to Wallace periodically via e-mail and Facebook chat through her friend's satellite Internet connection at a makeshift camp in a school ground.

Wallace has spent every night sleeping outside since the earthquake, her "adopted" four-year-old daughter Dada by her side.

For a while they made their beds on the runway of the local airport, where the UN set up a camp until planes started flying in again on Friday. With rain starting to fall she was considering sleeping inside again Saturday.

"Most people in Haiti are usually afraid of the night because that's when the 'jabs' come out. Jabs are basically the demons of the voodoo religion," Wallace says.

"It's funny, though, how now everyone is scared to sleep inside and they all sleep on the streets."

The Miami Herald reported Saturday that Jacmel appears to have been hit as hard as Port-au-Prince, but few are paying attention to the port city's woes.

At the camp, UN workers handed out small cookies, though Wallace contends not enough for everyone.

Wallace says the international response to the city has been slow, with no workers from the UN or the Red Cross visible in the local hospital.

She hasn't heard of any food being given out, saying she bought three sacks of rice that were put into bags and distributed by boys from the school.

"Afterwards they suggested that we organize a way to give out cooked food because some of the people who got a bag of uncooked rice might have rice, but they might not have water, salt, oil or even a pot and charcoal to cook with," she says.

"So we went back to the soccer field close to their community in Jacmel and found five women who volunteered to make food for 35 to 40 people each."

In the morning, Wallace hops into the Ford Ranger she bought last month. The truck was meant to transport pregnant women to the maternity centre Wallace was working to build before the earthquake.

Now, sometimes alone, sometimes with Dada, she drives out in search of the injured or lost, at times to hand out food, at times to transport others from the rubble to the overwhelmed hospital or camp.

"Gas is tough to get. I was lucky and didn't have to wait more than 45 minutes on the 13th to get diesel. But now the gas station is the most hectic place."

Over the last five days, Wallace, who speaks fluent Creole, has been surrounded by horrors.

"Broken houses; people sitting outside their homes waiting for the word that it's all over; people hysterically crying because of lost ones; dead people on the street or in the backs of trucks," she says.

"I have asked if the UN has organized anything for children who have lost their parents, but nothing has been set up yet. I think all orphaned children are probably still in the care of neighbours, relatives or strangers."

The catastrophe has only strengthened Wallace's resolve eventually to open an orphanage. She has always wanted to work in a developing country, spending a week at age 13 building houses in Mexico with a church group.

She first visited Haiti with another group two years later, went back at 17 and moved there for the long haul in 2008 after completing training to become a midwife.

She began her work in Jacmel in a house she rented with money saved doing maintenance at the Blackhawk Golf Course near Spruce Grove.

Additional funds poured in from family and friends, but Wallace's older sister Yvonne says they've never received funding outside their social circle.

Wallace founded her midwifery program in a house rented near Jacmel after learning about the high level of infant mortality in Haiti. The idea was to give traditional Haitian midwives the tools and skills needed to give the babies born in their care a better chance.

So far she's found herself delivering babies, sometimes in her own home, and taking in needy children.

Dada was the child of a mentally challenged woman named Mona, who was apparently a prostitute. Wallace met Dada when Mona was once again pregnant.

"After the baby (Frantz) was born I offered for them all to stay. Mona eventually decided to leave. Dada didn't want to leave, but her mom made her. Finally after months of Dada asking to come back, Mona came and asked if I would take Dada."

Then Wallace met Mirlanda, a 15-month-old girl who weighed only 10 pounds.

"I got a call telling me that a woman named Mirland was at my house and waiting for me to come home," she recalls in a blog post.

"When I arrived, Mirlanda was face down, sleeping on the floor and swimming in her '0-3 month'-sized dress."

For two months, Wallace gave Mirland good food, trying to help Mirlanda gain weight. Nothing happened. So Wallace decided to try taking Mirlanda in herself. She began to grow and gain weight. Wallace raved about Mirlanda's new-found strength to play.

"It (meant) a lot of work and not much sleep for a few weeks, but seeing her little arms and legs get a little fatter every day (made) it worth it.

Mirland took her little girl back before the earthquake and Wallace doesn't know what happened to them.

Her family is proud of her activities under such dire conditions.

"People are reading the news and they're reading about mass graves and dead bodies and it seems so hopeless," Yvonne says.

"Today Sarah and her friends fed 200 people rice ... She has been making a difference in small ways."

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For more information on Sarah Wallace's midwifery project, please visit her website, [Olive Tree Projects](#).

For updates, video, photos and info on how to donate to relief efforts, go to edmontonjournal.com/Haiti

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