

## **INTRODUCTION**

I'd like to thank Snow for inviting me to attend this conference as well as all those that helped put the conference together.

I am the mother of 8 children 6 adopted from Maison des Enfants de Dieu and 11 grandchildren 3 of whom were adopted from Maison des Enfants de Dieu. We began adopting in 2005 as empty nesters. Our family resides in Kingsland TX about 1 ½ hours from Austin.

## **TRAGEDY & TRIALS**

Tuesday, Jan. 12, 2010 was a day that affected my family personally and changed our lives forever. We had entered the process of adopting our last child in 2009. Our son, Benjamin Jhonsley, was living at Maison des Enfants de Dieu. Pierre, the staff, and the children were friends of my family and we stayed connected with our birth families. The earthquake was very personal to us. Approximately 4:30 PM we heard there was a 7.0 earthquake in PAP. It was 30 minutes after the earthquake before I was able to contact Pierre by phone to see if everyone was ok. We were only able to talk about 2-3 minutes.

Wednesday, Jan. 13, 2010 - My focus is on contacting Pierre to assess the situation and plan for FHG board members to travel to Haiti.

Thursday, Jan. 14, 2010 - I found out that the children are all ok, but the security wall was down. Food, water, and other supplies are limited and looting is a major concern. The children and staff are living outside under tarps and in tents. The babies are in the back of a truck.

Friday, Jan. 15, 2010 – I hear briefly from Pierre that everyone is ok. My husband and I begin making contacts with NGO's and others to take supplies to the orphanage. We have heard that the State Department may be considering Humanitarian Parole for the children in process of being adopted. We begin to contact the news media.

We began to work to get the children home to their adoptive families. There were 3 people that were very instrumental in making this task a reality, Diane Kunz, Center for Adoption Policy, Whitney Reitz, USCIS, and Jerrod Milton, Denver Children's Hospital. I had 24 hour contact with each of them. I also had personal cell phone numbers of a number of congressmen and senators as well as their aides. This was a task that crossed all party lines. Adoptive families contacted their Congressmen and Senators to continue to assist in getting the children home. Adoptive families contacted the media in their areas.

Saturday, Jan. 16, 2010 – I find out that security is deteriorating rapidly and supplies are running low. We start seeking political connections to assist Maison des Enfants de Dieu. I speak to Admiral Riker and the UN. My husband, Lonnie, determines the GPS coordinates of the orphanage and we start disseminating this information to several contacts in the US military. Jerrod Milton, Denver Children's Hospital has established a command center and sets up a call between me and a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff with regard to the situation at Maison.

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Monday, Jan. 18, 2010 – Families are provided an email address to upload their dossiers for USCIS to review and determine eligibility of children to travel. We email our dossier to the address, however, there is confusion about the correct email address that was given. Families are told that they will receive an automated receipt after they upload. I didn't realize that we had uploaded our dossier to the wrong address. I didn't realize that we had not received an automated receipt. We continued to work with families to get their dossier information to USCIS.

Diane Kunz, my husband, and I spent many hours putting lists together for USCIS regarding children at Maison, and adopting families to prepare children to travel. Children were not allowed to travel until USCIS cleared them and verified that the adoptive family was in the process of adopting a child. Adoptive parents also had to have verification of biometrics or fingerprints done and sent to USCIS.

The major difficulty with paperwork was that dossiers were in various offices in the Haitian government. Those offices were located around the Palace which was near the epicenter of the earthquake. Many of those buildings were either destroyed or were severely damaged by the earthquake. Much of the adoption process is done by hand and nothing is computerized. Adoption documents are still typewritten on a typewriter in Haiti.

DHS announces that they will use their authority and extend Humanitarian Parole to those Haitian children with established adoptive relationships with US adoptive families.

Tuesday, Jan. 19, 2010 – USCIS in Washington informs us that the children will have to appear in person at the US Embassy in PAP Haiti to be processed. I request security and transportation to the US Embassy in PAP. The State Department denies this request. We are told that no water, food or facilities would be provided at the US Embassy. I try to get them to change this decision, but I'm told that if they don't appear they will not be allowed to leave. We release a press release regarding this decision.

Wednesday, Jan. 20, 2010 – At 6:30 AM I am awakened after going to bed at 5:30 AM by Admiral Riker, US Coast Guard, responding to the press release and questioning the plan of sending the children to the US Embassy. I tell him USCIS has not given us a choice. We have to send the children or they won't be allowed to leave. He advised me with regard to security, diapers, water, and formula on the bus. I still find it a little humorous that someone who commands troops is concerned that there are enough diapers, water, and formula on the bus, but I was grateful for his concern and advice.

Our US military contacts are told to stop requesting security, transportation, and supplies for the orphanage. We are told to stop requesting assistance.

Around 11:15 PM my husband, Lonnie, realizes that we have not received a receipt from USCIS regarding our dossier. We re-send our dossier to the correct address. It is one of the last dossiers of the day.

The trip to the US Embassy in PAP is a disaster as you may have seen from news reports and the film "Adopting Haiti"

USCIS in Washington informs us not to take the children to the US Embassy again.

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Thursday, Jan. 21, 2010 – USCIS approves the first children to travel

Friday, Jan. 22, 2010 – Late in the day we hear we have received final paperwork at the US Embassy on 82 of the 107 children eligible for HP, but have missed our flight slot for the day. Around 10:00 PM we receive confirmation that the first group of children will come into Orlando-Sanford airport on Saturday. Our son is not in that first group to travel, but we are expecting that he will travel on Sunday. We immediately make flight arrangements to Orlando for the next day.

Saturday & Sunday, Jan. 23-24, 2010 – The first flight arrives around 4:00 PM. Several very sick children arrive. Families and news crews have arrived also. 30 of those children are taken to CO by the Governor of CO, another 20 are processed through the night, the rest of the children are still being detained in immigration. There are not enough supplies, food, water, diapers, formula. Parents are still waiting to receive their children. Lonnie and I begin to hear talk of moving the children to a refugee camp nearby. We begin to alert the media and a Florida state rep arrives seeking answers to the delay of releasing the children. We find out that HHS (Health and Human Services) is the hold up. Pressure begins to mount to get the children out of the airport and to their families.

During the afternoon on Sunday we find out that the Prime Minister of Haiti has issued a directive that no more children can leave Haiti without being individually approved by him. My son will not be arriving.

Sometime prior to midnight parents are allowed to be united with their children and are processed through. By 2:00 AM Monday we are on our way back to my sister's home to wait.

Monday, January 25, 2010 – 13 Days after the earthquake, there is no resolution regarding the 27 remaining children, including my son. We begin to prepare our children for the possibility that Ben might not come home. We are discouraged. FHG issues a press release about Haiti blocking the evacuation of our children who have Humanitarian Parole.

Friday, January 29, 2010 - While at a news interview in Orlando, I am handed a note from my husband stating that "Haiti PM has signed off!" I make the announcement on national TV that the remaining 27 children will be coming home including our son, Ben. The children will be arriving in Miami later that night. They will be released to His Home for Children in Miami and processed through the night. We head to Miami.

Saturday, January 30, 2010 – 18 days after the earthquake, and what seemed like a lifetime later, we were able to bring our son home to be united with his family. Several of our children are biologically related to Ben so it really was a special time in many ways. We all felt complete.

### **TRIUMPH**

An important lesson learned is that we needed to have copies of paperwork in the child's file at the orphanage. We now have a copy of the signed referral in each of the children's files at the orphanage along with a copy of their birth certificate, court guardianship, and court consent, as well as labs. We provide copies to the adoptive families as well. When a family visits their child for the first time we ask

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them to take a photo of the adoptive parent or parents with the child and send that photo along with a copy of their passport with the stamp page. This is also put in the child's file at the orphanage. We continually look for ways to improve this process.

I continued to work through 2010 with Diane Kunz at Center for Adoption Policy regarding HP children being able to finalize adoptions in the US as well as have a pathway to citizenship. Diane and many others, including Bill sponsor, US Representative Jeffery Fortenberry of Nebraska and 18 Co-Sponsors worked diligently with government officials which led to the "Help Haiti 2010 Act" being passed and signed into law on Dec. 9, 2010. This Bill made a pathway for HP children to become citizens of the US.

### **SHOW SLIDE**

I am happy to say that my son, Ben, is now a US citizen and that his adoption has been finalized in the US. He has adjusted very well in our family and it is great for all of us to be together. Many of the children that came home on HP from Maison have completed their adoptions and have obtained citizenship.

Approximately 20 children remained at Maison after the earthquake. Only one child was considered not a qualified match and was denied HP. I am pleased to say that child is currently in process of being adopted as well as many of the remaining 20 children. There are currently 83 children living at Maison des Enfants de Dieu.

A personal lesson that I have learned is that one person can make a difference and when united together we can change the world. It is my hope that you will join me to change the world for needy children individually and collectively around the world.

Thank You.