



City of Cottonwood Fire Department



For Immediate Release

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The City of Cottonwood Fire Department recently had two of our personnel travel to Haiti where they provided medical assistance. Firefighter Patrick McInnis spent the second week of July in Haiti and Lieutenant Brady Casson spent the third week in July. Both men made this trip on their personal time and at their personal expense with the desire to utilize their medical skills to assist the people of Haiti. Cottonwood Fire Department and the City of Cottonwood is fortunate to have personnel willing to give of themselves and their resources to help those in need whether in our community or around the world.

Here is a report of his activities in Haiti submitted by Firefighter Patrick McInnis:



Cottonwood Fire Department Firefighter Patrick McInnis in back of truck used to transport patients in Haiti

Haiti - Life and Death in Port au Prince

A few years ago I spoke to some friends who had volunteered their medical skills in Haiti. For years I have been interested in volunteering internationally for disaster response although I found it difficult to find a way to help. I was recently able to make my goal a reality by volunteering for a week at Hospital Bernard Mevs in Port au Prince,

Haiti. This opportunity was accomplished through “Project Medishare”. This nonprofit organization coordinates sending medical professionals from the United States and Canada to volunteer alongside local hospital staff. This hospital relies heavily on medical volunteers from North America to assist in keeping the hospital up and running.

Haiti has a long and varied past with a violent and crippling birth. In 1492 Christopher Columbus landed in the area and claimed the island for Spain. The Spanish later built the New World's first settlement on Haiti's north coast. In the late 1600's Haiti became French controlled and supplied large amounts of sugar, rum, coffee and cotton with slave labor. A bloody slave rebellion lasting many years finally led to Haiti's independence and eventual international recognition as an independent country. Haiti has endured civil war and great social and political unrest over the years to bring it to where it is today. Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere still struggling to recover from the January 12, 2010 earthquake. According to some official estimates 316,000 people were killed, 300,000 injured and 1.3 million displaced.

My trip took me from Phoenix to Miami and then to Port au Prince, Haiti. Port au Prince is Haiti's capital and is a crowded, busy and humid city. After landing in Port au Prince we were picked up by hospital staff and driven to the hospital. We were given a tour of the hospital and had a little time to relax. During the tour, a pickup truck brought in a woman with a deep laceration to her neck from a fight involving a bottle. My first shift started that evening, with me working the night shift from 10 PM to 6 AM. By the end of my shift, I had been awake for roughly 28 hours due to the long hours traveling to Haiti.

The hospital is located in a rough part of a rough city. The United Nations (UN) has a large armed security presence throughout the city, which they call a “stabilization mission”. There is a large UN base close by and UN helicopters and planes would fly overhead. One day a heavily armed Haitian SWAT team carried out an operation just outside the hospital gates. Primarily I worked in triage, which is where most patients come for assessment to determine if they need to be admitted to the hospital. A large gate and guards with shotguns secured the front of the hospital. A patient would come to the front gate and be admitted only after a conversation with a triage EMT. If there was no space available or if their illness or injury was not deemed serious enough they are turned away. The triage area is a small room with 3 walls, a bed and medical supplies. I worked a variety of shifts during my week there, with shifts ranging from 8 to 15 hours at a time, depending on how much help was needed. The weather was hot and humid and I would sweat most of the time with little relief. Often there were not enough of certain supplies or they would just completely run out. Other times equipment would not work so other equipment would have to be hunted down from other parts of the hospital. Every afternoon, the city power would be shut off and the hospital had to rely completely on generators and newly installed solar panels.

I had the opportunity to assist in the care of a great number of patients. Some of the injuries I dealt with were large lacerations from being slashed with knives. One young man was attacked with a machete and robbed. I assisted as his wounds were cleaned and sutured. A young woman came in with deep lacerations across her forehead and down her face from a large knife. There were countless lacerations from people being hit in the head with rocks or bottles. One man came in with a gunshot wound to his leg. One young boy fell off the second story of his house. Some patients came in barely breathing after suffering a large stroke or various illnesses. One man came in who had accidentally drunk battery acid, another man had accidentally drunk paint thinner and there was a woman who intentionally overdosed on pills. Once I had the opportunity to hold and feed a tiny premature baby weighing barely three pounds who was going home with her family the next day, only to have another tiny premature little girl lose her fight for life in front of me. There was nothing more that could be done for her.

One afternoon some American patients arrived at the hospital as the result of a vehicle accident. An injured man and his wife had lost their daughter and their injured friend had lost his daughter and sister in the accident. The Haitian driver had also perished. Our hearts went out to them, and all of us working at the hospital felt their tragedy very deeply. We assisted with their care and medical evacuation back to the US the next day.

The last patient of my last shift, a young man was brought in the back of a pickup truck. He had been in a motorcycle accident and lost his fight for life while traveling to the hospital. Though may stay I observed many patients coming in on foot, in the back of pickup trucks or on the back of motorcycles. Occasionally they arrived in ambulances of various types.

On numerous occasions I left the hospital to transport patients to other hospitals around the city. Usually this involved a pickup truck and extremely minimal supplies. One day we took one young boy suspected of having cholera to two different facilities but they both turned him away. In Haiti there is not always space available so people sometime go without care. At some facilities they are also denied care if they are unable to pay. The hectic “race car pace” through crowded busy streets with little or no traffic laws while riding in the back of a pickup truck with a sick child is something I will never forget. Later that day during a separate trip to the general hospital the young boy was finally admitted. This child lived on the streets and had no parents. Our hospital did not have the ability to care for cholera patients so he had to be transferred. I left him in a crowded and dark pediatric ward after getting him registered. As I walked away I left a piece of my heart behind with him.

These are just a few of the countless situations and patients I encountered during my time in Haiti. I left the country with my head spinning, wondering what I had just been through over the past week. I gained a great appreciation for the healthcare we have here in the United States. I was also thankful for the quality of our medical equipment and supplies we have at the Cottonwood Fire Department. On my first shift back to work on my fire engine, it was a relief to know I had enough of whatever equipment I needed to deal with any emergency. I have been asked numerous times since I returned if I would ever go back to Haiti. As difficult and downright traumatic as the experience was, I feel an inner calling to help. I have no question that I will return one day soon.

Patrick McInnis
Cottonwood Fire Department