

ADRIAN WALKER

Haiti's inspiration

By Adrian Walker, Globe Columnist | May 22, 2010

Tom O'Neill is a crusty, combustible guy, but he isn't the kind of man who is given to cheap emotion.

So it is telling that he was so deeply moved by a trip he took last week to earthquake-ravaged Port-au-Prince.

"There are no words for what we saw there," he said yesterday.

O'Neill is a veteran powerbroker who quietly spends a lot of time and money doing things for other people. One of the charitable ventures he participates in is called Hearts for Haiti, a group that funds three orphanages.

Or it did, before the January earthquake that leveled Haiti's capital. Two of the three homes were destroyed, while the other sustained damage. O'Neill and other donors had gone down to try to make plans to rebuild the homes, which house about 200 children in total. Two of the orphanages care for children who have been orphaned, while the third is devoted to young people with moderate to severe special needs.

That Port-au-Prince remains devastated hardly came as a surprise to the group. It was the resilience Haitians displayed in the face of tragedy that amazed and moved them.

"I can tell you that there must be a God, because at the end of the day there was a smile on people's faces," he said yesterday. "There aren't words I could speak that would describe the hardship they live with."

Before the orphanages can be rebuilt; they have to be leveled. Parts of the buildings are still standing and dangerous. Residents have been hired to help tear them down, and O'Neill and company found themselves swinging sledgehammers, trying to help bring down what is left of the buildings. The residents are living in temporary housing while the long process of rebuilding the orphanages begins.

O'Neill's interest in Haiti is an outgrowth of his work with North Cambridge Catholic High School. He is a longtime board member of the small private school, whose student body is almost 40 percent Haitian. Until last week, his involvement with the orphanages had been confined to raising money; he had never traveled to the country.

As a former politician, he was struck by the weakness of the country's institutions. "There's no government down there that you notice," he said in his typically blunt style.

O'Neill's group had the good fortune of being accompanied by the Rev. John J. Unni of St. Cecilia Catholic Church in the Back Bay, a man whose ties to Haiti and this project run deep. He has been to Haiti so many times that he has lost count and had visited two weeks after the earthquake.

One of Unni's colleagues, the Rev. Tom Hagen, has run schools for years in one of the poorest sections of Port-au-Prince. Five of the eight schools his order operated have been destroyed.

"He's sleeping in a tent right now where the rains come and the mud flows underneath him," Unni said. "Right next to him is a mound of rocks where some seminarians are buried. What these guys are living through is unfathomable."

Like O'Neill, Unni was moved by the reaction of rank-and-file Haitians to the disaster. "What I saw was the resilience of the Haitian people," he said. "I saw hope. It touches the spirit in a way that inspires. We have a lot to do to be in solidarity with them."

It is one thing for someone like O'Neill to raise money for a worthy cause. But he found that writing checks did not prepare him for being face to face with massive tragedy and the need that comes with it. In the days since he returned, he said, he hasn't been able to talk about much else. He said he has not made his last trip to Port-au-Prince.

"It is transformational," he said. "Honestly, it does take you a little while to get your mind off it. It is a life-changer. This is something I'm going to do for the rest of my life."

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