

Local group home from Haiti - January 21, 2010

Belchertown Sentinel

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BELCHERTOWN – A local organization narrowly escaped the 7.0-magnitude earthquake that shook Haiti, having left Port-au-Prince just hours before the devastation. Belchertown Town Planner Doug Albertson, founder of Opportunities for Communities, and a group of members had just spent a week in the small community of Balan, which is situated just 20 minutes from the epicenter of the earthquake.



"Our Opportunities for Communities group returned from a wonderful trip to Haiti Tuesday. We left Port-au-Prince at 2 p.m. after a drive around the government buildings and presidential palace," said Albertson. "It was when we landed three and a half hours later that we heard about the earthquake." Although Albertson said the group was grateful to have made it out of Haiti before the quake hit they were concerned for their friends. "We were greatly blessed to have not been there when it happened," said Albertson, adding, "Our

Haitian friends had gone on their ways out of the city by afternoon."

At first Albertson said the group's Haitian contact, Timothé Indrik, could not be reached, but since then they have been in touch and are working with him to get supplies to those in need. Opportunities for Communities was founded by Albertson about one year ago, and the recent trip to

Haiti was its first full trip. The group is described by Albertson as "educational in nature," bringing people from America overseas to experience other countries and how the rest of the world lives. The group is made up of mostly college students, but the last trip included one retiree.

Albertson said he decided to form the group because he spent "years looking for something more," and Opportunities for Communities combined his desire to explore and his care about the community here.

During the trip the group acquired a small piece of land, and Albertson said he envisions the spot as an opportunity to interact with the community. At the same time the group spent several days with Haitian families, particularly the youths. Albertson said there were several impromptu games of soccer and Frisbee. At the end of the week the group was invited to attend a village council meeting, at which time the president of the council welcomed the group as citizens, calling their work good, said Albertson.

Since the earthquake, the group's mission has not changed, although a scheduled trip to the region in February has been cancelled due to the unknown factor at the airports and streets. "Haiti is a magnificent beautiful nation of gracious and generous people. The poorest people we know give beyond their means to show us hospitality," said Albertson. "By us giving locally, we will see how these people can come back even under extreme adversity. Haiti for some unknown reason has repeated disasters. We regularly hear about how poor the people are. Yet I contend they have much greater wealth than we. They have community far beyond what we know in our society. They have amazing resilience. They have vibrant, living spirits. Let's put our hearts into giving for them."

Opportunities for Communities is open to all. To find out more information on the group or to make a donation to the Haiti earthquake relief visit opportunitiesforcommunities.org. "We can't change the whole place, but maybe we can help just a little," said Albertson. "It's a start."