

Founder of Opportunities for Communities Inc., left Haiti only hours before earthquake struck - January 25, 2010 **Springfield Republican**

Founder of Opportunities for Communities Inc., Douglas Albertson of Belchertown, left Haiti only hours before earthquake struck Springfield Republican

By John Appleton

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Belchertown Town Planner Douglas F. Albertson, who also founded a non profit educational and service organization called Opportunities for Communities, is seen with Jessenia Indrik in Haiti. Indrik is the daughter of Opportunities for Communities program manager Timothe Indrik.



BELCHERTOWN – Town Planner Douglas F. Albertson says he will be heading back to Haiti as soon as he can do so without being in the way of earthquake relief efforts. His last trip with a small group from the nonprofit educational and service organization he co-founded ended just three hours before the Port-au-Prince area was devastated by the Jan. 12 earthquake.

Albertson and 10 others from Opportunities for Communities Inc., were still on their flight back home when the earthquake struck.

Albertson and his colleagues, mostly from the Pioneer Valley, spent most of their time in a village near Les Cayes, about 120 miles west of Port-au-Prince.

In his role as co-founder and president of Opportunities for Communities Inc., he has been to Haiti three times in the past year, each time bringing a small group intent on learning about energy, agriculture, politics, food, culture and other issues in poverty-stricken Haiti and doing what they could for people living nearby.

They had another trip planned for February with some high school students, but Albertson said they will go to Guatemala instead.

“We would be in the way in Haiti,” he said. “We would be taking resources they need. The better way to support them right now is to stay out of the way, and we had been wanting to get this Guatemalan project going.”

But Albertson said he envisions an ongoing relationship between Opportunities for Communities and Les Cayes and the villages nearby.

“We are there for the long run,” he said.

With money from donations, Opportunities for Communities has established a youth soccer program, started sewing classes, equipped a kitchen at a school for poor indentured servant children and bought a few acres of agricultural land they hope to turn into an educational retreat.

The organization has also provided laborers in and around Les Cayes with tools, giving them a better shot in the job market, and allowing them to pay for them over time.

Albertson wants to get back to the region as soon as he feels he can without interfering with relief efforts so he can assess conditions and make plans for another group trip in June to work on programs that have been started.

The organization hired a Haitian, Timothe Indrik, to manage the programs near Les Cayes. He reported damage around Les Cayes, but nothing like the devastation in Port-au-Prince.

While not in the relief business, Opportunities for Communities did send Indrik about \$2,000 in the days after the earthquake. He used the money to buy food, water, medicine, toiletries and other items that he then transported in a rental car to people in the more devastated areas.

Albertson said his organization accepts donations from the public but money contributed would go into its ongoing programs, not disaster relief. Information about donating and the programs can be found at OpportunitiesforCommunities.org.

He advises people interested in donations related to the earthquake to contribute to one of the disaster relief organizations.

His own organization was founded a year ago with the idea of giving college students and other adults a chance at hands-on learning about sustainable development and foreign cultures with a byproduct of helping people in countries they visit.

A former Peace Corps volunteer, Albertson saw his most recent trip as a very good experience because of what his group accomplished and because, at the end of a week’s activity, the people of the village had evaluated them and welcomed them as citizens of the village.

Albertson said he was emotionally affected by the scenes of destruction in Port-au-Prince soon after his departure. He said Wall’s Guest House where his group spent its final night was in ruins the next day.

“I did not feel like I narrowly escaped anything,” he said. “What was really weird was that so many people we saw in that last morning were now dead, including some of the staff and guests at Wall’s. I want to say it was surreal, but it is more emotional than that.”