

Devotion to Haiti allies after quake

By [Nick Grabbe](#)
Staff Writer

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Opportunities for Communities volunteer Anna Jacob with Figgins, from Belab, Haiti, in January.

Eleven visitors from the Amherst area left Haiti less than three hours before the earthquake hit Jan. 12. Since then, the group has raised and sent more than \$2,000 to Haiti and is providing relief to victims of the disaster.

Five of the visitors to Haiti are over 50 and six are under 23. They are part of Opportunities for Communities, an organization formed last year to expose young people to how most of the world lives and to see what help they can provide, said Doug Albertson of Belchertown.

Just before it hit

The group left the airport in Port-au-Prince at 2 p.m. Jan. 12 and the earthquake hit just before 5 p.m. They landed in New York at 5:45 and learned about the earthquake from a cellphone message from the mother of one of the young people, Albertson said.

"They were freaked out," he said the next day. "It's been kind of emotional for all of us, wondering about our friends, thinking we were just there. We were fortunate to leave when we did."

Albertson then learned that the village the group had visited, about 100 miles west of Port-au-Prince, sustained damage but nothing like the capital. Food and fuel are available there, he said.

The group raised \$1,000 and forwarded it to its Haitian program director, Timothe Indrik. Last Saturday, Indrik received the money after waiting in line for five hours. He and four others used the money to buy water, bread, crackers, medicine and toiletries and drove to Port-au-Prince.

"We have visited and served many different places where many groups of homeless people are staying," he wrote in an email message to the group. "We brought them water, candy bars/junk food, toothbrushes and paste, soap and toys for the kids."

Indrik said he plans to make another trip to Port-au-Prince. He has rented an inexpensive car, but the price of gasoline in Haiti has tripled and prices of water and food have gone up. On Wednesday, the Amherst group sent him another \$1,000 that it raised. "We are fine because the earthquake did not hit us too bad (thanks to God), but every Haitian is living with a broken heart since Jan. 12," Indrik wrote. "So our great desire is always to help others as much as we can."

The needs of Haiti will be great long after the TV cameras move on, Albertson said.

"Public attention will drift elsewhere, but the hunger, disease and lack of shelter will continue there," he said.

The group is "invested for the long run," he said, and will keep seeking donations on its Web site, opportunitiesforcommunities.org. "The Haitian people are hurting," he said. "Maybe we should give until we hurt a little, too."

On the morning of Jan. 12, the group from the Amherst area saw the presidential palace in Port-au-Prince - which collapsed six hours later.

Driving through Haiti's capital, Ken Mundt of Amherst wondered if there is any seismic activity there, and Albertson said he thought about the same thing the day before.

"It is impossible not to, upon seeing the buildings of hand-made concrete blocks, the buildings stacked upon each other and precariously mounted upon hillsides and ravine brims," he wrote in an email to friends and supporters.

Albertson said he wants to go back to Haiti to help with relief efforts, but he's concerned about getting in the way.

"Haiti for some unknown reason has repeated disasters," he wrote in the email. "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."

The 10-day trip was designed to establish friendships and give the young people a more rounded perspective, Albertson said. "It gives people a greater appreciation of what they have. We really don't live in circumstances that represent the rest of the world."

The visitors asked residents of the village what they needed. They are looking into getting solar panels so they can have some electricity, Albertson said.

"We want to leverage the resources we have back here to see how we can contribute to a better life for these people," he said.