

## Helping to ease suffering

### Gardner pediatrician spearheads effort to build clinic in Haiti

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When Dr. John Mulqueen first visited Haiti in 2001, he was not prepared for the depth of poverty in the island nation.

"I was shaken to the core," he said.

The Gardner pediatrician said he heard about the poverty and read the statistics, but was thunderstruck seeing it face-to-face.

"You smell it and you feel it and you taste it," he said.

When he returned home, he thought it would take two or three years before he would be able to bring himself to go there again, but within a month, he was ready to go back. He and his wife, Paula, have returned over and over, and are now poised to create something more permanent to help the people living there.

"Once you see the poverty, it is hard to turn your back and



COURTESY DR. JOHN MULQUEEN

Dr. John Mulqueen and Safira Amazon of Haiti, a Worcester Academy student, work with a patient at a clinic in Haiti last summer.

pretend it doesn't exist," Dr. Mulqueen said.

The Mulqueens have formed Forward in Health, a nonprofit organization, with an eye toward building a clinic. The clinic would provide medical care to residents near Les Cayes, Haiti, six days per week.

"The people there don't have anything, and that includes medical care," he said. "I felt like we were just putting a Band-Aid on a patient that was hemorrhaging."

Dr. Mulqueen said people in Massachusetts are surprised to learn that a country just a few hundred miles off the coast of the United States has poverty that rivals the poorest



COURTESY DR. JOHN MULQUEEN

Former Gardner High School student Colleen Poulin works with a crowd of Haitian children at a clinic set up by Forward in Health.

nations in Africa, including Sudan and Somalia. He said the distance from this country to Haiti is about the same as traveling from Boston to Detroit.

"We don't think of Detroit as the other end of the earth," he said. "A lot of the focus now is on Africa. Haiti is the poor neighbor no one wants to talk about."

The Mulqueens' first trips to Haiti were through the Roman Catholic Diocese of Worcester and Sacred Heart Church in Gardner, which has a twin parish in Les Cayes.

Les Cayes is a city about the size of Worcester. The medical clinic will be built in Fonde Fred, a town of about 7,500 just outside of Les Cayes on 3-1/2 acres purchased by Forward in Health. Plans are for an almost 10,000-square-foot facility with 5,460 square feet on the first floor for the clinic offices and a second floor for a director's office and

kitchen. The upper floor also will provide accommodations for up to 16 overnight guests.

Dr. Mulqueen said they have already started to build a 10-foot-high wall around the site. He said because of the extreme poverty, the wall is necessary to keep people from

stealing building supplies. A shallow well to supply water to mix concrete was also dug.

The wall is expected to be completed in April. If all goes well, the medical center should be completed early in 2009.

Although building in Haiti poses some problems, the key will be raising \$350,000 to help pay for the construction costs.

Dr. Mulqueen said they hope to pay some of the costs through donations of \$5,000 each for the naming rights to rooms in the clinic. Naming rights for seven of the 20 rooms have already been sold. They are also seeking donations to help pay for the remaining costs and the \$50,000 per year it will cost to run and staff the clinic with two doctors, two nurses and one social worker.

So far, among the donations to the project has been \$9,000

to purchase the land from Worcester law firm Fusaro, Altomare & Ermilio and donations of the initial design of the clinic by Gerry McGuire, a software engineer and member of the Forward in Health board of directors, and a final design donated by Boston architectural design firm TRO Jung Brannen.

When it is up and running, the clinic will not only provide medical care, but a well for residents to use for drinking water. It will be run by Haitian doctors, nurses and social workers. The hope is the clinic will have a positive effect on commerce in the town, which is primarily a farming community. Dr. Mulqueen said businesses needed to service people visiting the clinic, including restaurants, will likely spring up nearby.

Dr. Mulqueen said his experiences in Haiti have changed the way he views his job as a medical doctor.

"Your job becomes your vocation again," he said. "We can't cure everyone, but we can care for everyone when we go down there."

In bringing medical care to Les Cayes, the Mulqueens have also introduced others to the difficult circumstances of the people there. Seeing was believing, and almost disbelieving, for state Rep. Anne M. Gobi, D-Spencer, when she traveled to Haiti with Forward in Health in July 2006.

"It was a huge eye-opener," she said. "I've been to poor countries before, but I've never experienced anything in my life like it."

Ms. Gobi said she went because she has been friends with Paula Mulqueen since elementary school. Although she knew nothing of medicine, she was able to help out by interviewing patients when they first arrived at a temporary clinic.

The shock of seeing sewage running in the streets, and people living in huts with no running water or electricity, was only the beginning, she said. With AIDS a huge problem in the country, she met 13-year-old heads of households bringing their younger family members for medical treatment. Also striking to her was just realizing that children had nothing to play with.

Ms. Gobi will return to Haiti next week with a Statehouse delegation, not as part of the Forward in Health effort, but to see what else can be done to help America's neighbor. She said she is going there March 26 to 31 with state Rep. Marie P. St. Fleur, a former resident of Haiti, as well as others in the political, academic and scientific communities, to work with people in the town of Milot. Their focus will be on



T&G Staff/RICK CINCLAIR  
Dr. John Mulqueen sits in his Gardner office surrounded by medicines and supplies for Haiti.

improving sanitation and finding opportunities for renewable energy to turn the town into a model community.

As part of Forward in Health's mission to bring medical relief to people in Haiti, the organization has also been working with Gardner High School's Project Haiti club, and organizing trips for students to visit and work there.

Although the next trip is in July, Dr. Mulqueen's office is already filled with boxes of various types of medicine they will attempt to bring into Haiti as part of the trip. Getting medicine through Haitian customs is one of the challenges of Forward in Health, but the supplies are crucial for the temporary clinics they set up until a permanent clinic is completed.

A majority of the students visiting Haiti with Forward in Health are from Gardner High

School, but there are also students from Cushing Academy, Oakmont and Quabbin Regional High Schools.

Dr. Mulqueen said it is gratifying to him to see the effect on students who visit Haiti with him. He said two students decided after visiting Haiti to go into nursing. One of the Gardner High School

students who went on Haiti trips in 2005 and 2006, Alex Fletcher, wrote a blog about her 2006 experiences for her fellow students in Gardner to read and later, in college as a journalism major, wrote a story on her experiences for the Boston Haitian Reporter, a newspaper that circulates in the Boston Haitian community.

The students raise money for the trips and for the medical supplies through talent shows and other fundraising events.

When Colleen Poulin of Gardner traveled to Haiti on a student trip in July, she said, her team not only worked in clinics, but sandpapered and painted beds for a nursing home. She said that when she left for Haiti, she expected to work in the clinic and provide medical care.

"What I did not expect was that I would bond with people who don't speak my language and don't have the luxuries in life that I have," she said.