

Volunteers help in Haiti, Nashville

Nurse Nancy Burnett lives a gut-wrenching reality trying to save quake victims

By **DANA TIERNEY**
SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN

BETHANY — As her flight descended into Port-au-Prince this month, Nancy Burnett recalled the images of earthquake-stricken Haiti she'd seen on television.

"I thought I'd been to the third world in Kathmandu," said Burnett, a Bethany resident who works as a Pediatric Intensive Care Unit nurse with Doernbecher Children's Hospital in Portland. But nothing prepared her for Haiti.

Burnett and 17 colleagues assisted earthquake victims in Port-au-Prince via Project Medishare (www.projectmedishare.org), a Florida-based nonprofit that's been coordinating medical relief services in Haiti since 1994 in collaboration with the University of Miami.

Exiting the plane, Burnett passed young men leaning on a rusted fence amid rubble and dust, hoping for help. A driver took the Doernbecher team to a fenced camp where they spent a week as the only pediatric intensive care unit in the country.

Devastation from the magnitude-7 Jan. 12 earthquake still appeared fresh. Outside the gates, pigs gorged on garbage strewn in the street and a spray-painted plea covered a



JOANNE MIKOL

Nancy Burnett of Bethany cares for a baby in the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit at the Project Medishare camp in Port-au-Prince.

broken concrete slab: "We still need HELP!"

Burnett says a gut-wrenching reality set in. Compared to the sophisticated equipment and plentiful supply of running water in the United States, the camp provided a single tent housing an emergency room, and intensive care units for neonatal, pediatric and adult care, with a single, solar-powered water spigot that ceased to work each day.

The disorganized lab supplies, donated from around the world, evoked ingenious ideas by volunteers who organized as they were able while jury-rigging makeshift medical equipment.

Two nurses were available for 14 patients. Back home, a minimum of five nurses would have been available to meet the demand. Tempera-

tures were over 100 degrees and the humidity hovered at 90 percent. At times, administering an IV on one another proved the only way Burnett and her colleagues could rehydrate themselves.

The camp's sleeping tent housed 120 cots, where Burnett and the rest of the evening crew tried to sleep following 12-hour shifts. "Imagine trying to sleep inside of a tent at 105 degrees where people are awake," she said.

Burnett says at least one child died each day, provoking the Haitian expression of grief — yelling and wailing. In a moment of despair, Burnett found a poignant text by her parish priest, Father John Kerns of St. Juan Diego Catholic Church, that gave her strength. "God, give me insight. God, give me wisdom. God, give me strength. Thank you for the privilege of serving these people, in this place, at this time."

Brazilian soldiers in a United Nations ambulance transported a young boy to camp with an infected bug bite on his leg that required amputation without delay. Burnett was surprised at the gracious, devoted nature of the boy's family.

"I never thought an amputation would be a happy occasion," she says. The family was grateful to the Doernbecher volunteers for saving the boy's life, she says, adding, "You see the beauty and resilience of these people."

— Dana Tierney:
bethanyneighbor@yahoo.com