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Keeping Haiti in her heart

Psychiatrist seeks to improve mental health in her native land devastated by quake

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BY SANDY THORN CLARK

Dr. Marie-Claude Rigaud, a Haitian native who practices occupational psychiatry in Aurora, insists she's not unlike all Haitians.

"We all keep Haiti in our hearts," she says, explaining why she labored for three months helping to organize a just-completed worldwide summit hoping to offer solutions for Haiti's mental health catastrophe.

Ecstatic with the "very, very positive" outcome of the first-of-its-kind Haitian Mental Health Summit June 26 and 27 in Miami, an event sponsored by the Illinois Psychiatric Society. Rigaud, in particular, cites the success of communication and unification among the mental health experts who gathered from the United States, Canada and Haiti.

"I can't think of anything we wanted to achieve [at the summit] that didn't happen -- that was the amazing part," assesses Rigaud, who was raised in Haiti and realized that Haiti's mental health system was broken -- or, in her words, "nearly non-existent" -- before the catastrophic earthquake last Jan. 12 that affected an estimated 3 million people, leaving an estimated 230,000 dead, an estimated 300,000 injured, and 1 million homeless.

"Mental health comes last in Haiti -- and even in the United States, for that matter -- so the earthquake meant an even larger population suddenly was in need of services that don't exist. And while there were a lot of isolated groups who wanted to do something to help Haiti after the earthquake, they were unable to communicate and help each other. At the summit, I actually learned that things were a little bit worse there than even I imagined," says Rigaud, who had family members emotionally traumatized by the devastating earthquake.

Summit participants now will work to enhance the mental health plan being developed by the Haitian Minister of Health. Emphasis will be on educating and training children in Haiti about the prevention of mental health issues. "This is the future," stresses Rigaud. The grandmother of 11 met her now-retired husband in medical school in Haiti. She divides her time between homes in Aurora and Florida.

"The summit was just the first step. Participants now will need to form an advisory council, and we will need to move from isolated services to a systematic approach to mental health. We will keep in touch with the professionals in Haiti through e-mails, and we might even have to use Skype. In November, we will officially present our ideas to the American Psychiatric Association meeting in Boston," says Rigaud.

She lectures at the University of Illinois on topics related to mental health in the workplace.

"If I can have a positive effect on the mental health of my brothers and sisters in Haiti, I will be filled with joy," Rigaud says.

Sandy Thorn Clark is a local free-lance writer.

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