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Aurora psychiatrist Marie Claude Rigaud organizes effort to bolster mental health services in her native Haiti

By Nancy Gier, Special to the Tribune

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Psychiatrist Marie Claude Rigaud thinks of her late brother-in-law when she talks about her quest to bolster mental health services in her native Haiti.

"He is my driving force," the Aurora resident said of her husband's brother Gerald Rigaud, who died seven years ago of complications from diabetes. "He was a child psychiatrist who was trained at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. He left a very successful career in the U.S. to go home."

Although Rigaud has not visited her homeland for several years, she has remained connected through her leadership roles in the Association of Haitian Physicians and the Haitian American Psychiatric Association, and through her love and concern for the people there, including close friends and extended family. The son of a close friend was killed in the January earthquake.

"It's like I'm in Haiti every day, even before the earthquake," Rigaud said, "but now help is more urgent."

According to Rigaud, mental health services in Haiti have always been dismal. Since the devastating earthquake rocked the island nation seven months ago, she has felt compelled to try to make a difference.

Rigaud organized the Haitian Mental Health summit held June 26-27 at the University of Miami in Coral Gables, Fla. The summit brought together about 70 psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers from the U.S, as well as social workers from Haiti and representatives of the Haitian Ministry of Health. The group worked on assessing current and creating a model for development of community mental health care.

"Since the earthquake, many residents are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, but that is not our only focus," Rigaud said. "Unfortunately, there is a culture in Haiti that ridicules disability. There is a stigma, and mental health is treated like a poor cousin."

An important goal is trying to bring a coordinated effort into what she sees as chaos within the rebuilding efforts, Rigaud said.

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"There are too many cooks in the Haitian kitchen and not enough chefs," she said. "There were disturbing reports about what was going on there after the earthquake. We heard about NGOs (non-government organizations) not sharing. This was common before the earthquake. For me, it was a vision. Something has to be done to prevent wasted resources."

A mother of five and grandmother of 11, Rigaud is an occupational psychiatrist who does evaluations for disability and fitness for duty. She met her Andre Rigaud, her husband and a retired pathologist, in medical school in Haiti. They came to the U.S. in 1964 and settled in Baltimore, where both pursued medical specialties, she in psychiatry at Seton Psychiatric Institute and he in pathology. Their move to the U.S. was also prompted by concern about their safety in Haiti.

"My husband's father was an enemy of Papa Doc (Francois Duvalier, who was president of Haiti from 1957 until his death in 1971) and spoke out against him," Rigaud said.

Duvalier's son and successor Jean-Claude, also a dictator, was overthrown in 1986. The Rigauds visited Haiti through the years, bringing donated medical supplies and volunteering their medical services.

The couple moved to Illinois in 1978 when Andre Rigaud was offered a job at what is now Rush-Copley Medical Center in Aurora. Marie Claude Rigaud practiced psychiatry and returned to school, earning her master's degree in public health from the University of Illinois at Chicago in 1988.

"This degree taught me about organizing programs," she said. "Public health is also a much needed part of the medical system in Haiti."

Rigaud started a partial hospitalization program for those with mental illness at what is now Provena Mercy Medical Center in Aurora. The program was discontinued, but a similar program, also based on a psycho-social model, eventually took its place. It is a model she hopes to replicate in Haiti.

"We'd like to steer the Ministry of Health toward a psycho-social rehabilitation model," Rigaud said. "Culturally, people would be more accepting of traditional occupational therapies such as art and music. They would be able to ventilate using these modalities. Given the culture, it would be better than giving them a pill."

A member of the Illinois Psychiatric Society, Rigaud contacted Meryl Sosa, the society's executive director, for help in planning and funding the summit. Their first meeting was in April. The summit was held less than three months later. Sosa helped secure funding through a \$30,000 grant from the American Psychiatric Association.

"It became a reality because I got all that support," Rigaud said. "It was overwhelming to see all that enthusiasm."

Said Sosa: "When we sat down with Dr. Rigaud, we became very excited about the project. We wanted to see if there was a synergy among the programs there and avoid duplication. Dr. Rigaud is very dedicated to the project. She spent hours on it. She's very generous with her time. She's great at pulling people together in a very short time. Without her leadership, there wouldn't have been a summit."

Rigaud soon will organize a task force that will launch what she calls "the summit in action."

"We're waiting for the executive summary," Rigaud said. "We'll look at how the summit's objective can be achieved, and we'll be working with the Haitian Ministry of Health. We're going to make sure that

whoever goes to Haiti has a plan."

Rigaud expects to return to Haiti soon.

"When my being there can be effective, I will go," Rigaud said. "I don't want to just drop in and have a look."

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