

by Julia Browning

Harboring Hope

JoAnne Kuehner's three-decade commitment to Haiti continues

Haiti is a country with a long and troubled history. Though the Haitians won their independence from France in 1804 after a long revolution, the now free men and women couldn't celebrate for long. France would recognize the country's independence in exchange for a payment of 150 million francs, or \$20 billion dollars, as compensation for lost profit.

In order to lift the embargo imposed by France, Britain and the United States, Haiti agreed to pay and did so by taking out high-interest loans. The Haitian government struggled to settle the debt until 1947, according to the IMF Working Papers, leaving the government and the economy in disarray.

Today, Haiti remains the poorest country of the Americas. According to the most recent household

survey, more than half of Haitians live below the national poverty level.

Close to Haiti geographically, but a world away in terms of economic opportunity, JoAnne Kuehner of Naples once had no idea she would dedicate her life to aiding Haiti's poor.

The first time Kuehner visited Haiti was as a board member of the disaster aid nonprofit, Americares. There, the mental seed was planted

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for her Naples-based nonprofit, Hope for Haiti, which has been aiding the country for the last 30 years.

"I had traveled considerably, and I'd been to Africa and other Third World countries," Kuehner said. "But when I got to Haiti... they're in a class by themselves. They say it's Third World, but, come on, it's beyond Third World. There's no question about it."

On Kuehner's first trip to Haiti, a little girl around age 12 tugged on her skirt and asked if she would pay the tuition for her to attend school. Without a business plan in place or any idea how she was going to raise the money, Kuehner said yes.

"People ask, 'Well, why did you say yes?'" Kuehner said. "Because I can. I'm very

JoAnne Kuehner comforts a Haitian infant on one of her early trips to Haiti.



fortunate. I have a beautiful life and this little girl needed help and she asked for it. Why not help?"

That became Kuehner's modus operandi — identify the problem, commit to solving it, and not let up until she found a way to make it happen.

Kuehner looked around her for solutions and found herself surrounded by Haitian

art. In 1989, she bought paintings and craft work, transported them in huge cases back to the U.S. (a practice that wouldn't hold up in today's Customs and Border Protection offices), with intent to sell the pieces around Florida and dedicate the money to educating Haitian children.

The concept would eventually change to broad fundraising efforts for multiple



JoAnne Kuehner's love for Haiti hasn't faltered in three decades.

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initiatives in Haiti, starting with education, but growing to support projects related to health care, infrastructure, water and the economy.

"We would go into a community and ask, 'What can we do for you?'" Kuehner said. "We don't want to say, 'You need to do this; you need to do that.' We don't want to inflict our standards on other people. Especially people who can't afford it."

Inevitably, the answers from people were similar, with parents asking for education and health care for their children — as neither are provided by the Haitian government.

Kuehner, who has now been to Haiti about 100 times, witnessed the need for health services when she first visited the general hospital.

"There was a little baby that reminded me of my son," Kuehner remembered. "He would cry his eyes out, but there was not one tear because he was so dehydrated."

Desperate to comfort the boy, she went to pick him up, but was advised not to by the nurse, as she could risk dislodging his IV.

And it wouldn't be Kuehner's last experience with IVs while helping in Haiti. On another trip, while Kuehner was visiting Mother Teresa's Home for the Dying, she was instructed by the priest working there to help him insert IVs into all of the patients.

With no nursing experience and nothing to practice on, Kuehner watched the priest dutifully and went on inserting the IVs.

"The Lord was definitely watching over those patients!" Kuehner exclaimed at the memory.

Today, Hope for Haiti provides health care to more than 15,000 patients every year and more than 7,000 students attend schools supported by the organization.



The children of Haiti who JoAnne Kuehner found were so eager to learn, they inspired her to start her nonprofit and aid thousands.

"Every time we turned a corner, we would find another reason we needed to educate," Kuehner said. "Parents would say, 'I don't even know how to write my name, can I go to school, too?' We don't think about these things. We just take all of that for granted."

Education continues to be a staple as Hope for Haiti grows, now with Kuehner's granddaughter, Tiffany Kuehner, taking the reins as chair of the nonprofit, helping the company to think bigger and focus on a larger portion of the country.

"I thought I was just helping a few Haitians," Kuehner said. "I had nothing in the back of my mind, like I'm going to build this to a huge organization... But I think that a lot more people understand what's happening in Haiti and will be there for the people. I'm not going any place. I'm going to be there as long as I can." ❄️



Read more about JoAnne Kuehner's experiences in her book, "Oh, For the Love of Haiti!"

