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Three Days in Haiti, Part 1: Meet Julie Roberts

This three-part series profiles Julie Roberts and her work in Haiti since a devastating earthquake in 2010. From amputating infected limbs to investing in pay-it-forward microcredit loans, Roberts is dedicated to helping Haitians recover.

By Emily Beers

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Courtesy of Emily Beers

It is January 2010.

Julie Roberts finishes a long run in training for the Vancouver Marathon and rushes home to cook dinner for her four children.

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She turns on the TV to find ubiquitous breaking news about a devastating 7.0-magnitude earthquake that just hit Haiti, the poorest country in the Americas. The country's capital, Port-au-Prince, was hit especially hard. And because of poorly built infrastructure, buildings crumbled like sandcastles, taking tens of thousands of lives in the process.

The death toll is rising with every second. It will eventually number more than 200,000.

CNN's Anderson Cooper is stationed outside of a hospital in Port-au-Prince, telling the story virtually from the epicenter of the quake. In the background, Roberts can see the rubble and the injured bodies, and she can feel the devastation.



Courtesy of Julie Roberts



Courtesy of Julie Roberts

The Haitian government estimates the earthquake destroyed 250,000 residences and 30,000 commercial buildings.

A part-time paramedic, she feels a sudden obligation to help, and not in the dollar-a-day sponsorship-program kind of way. Roberts feels the obligation to get involved. She heads to her computer to research flights to Haiti. Ten minutes and CA\$1,000 later, her flight is booked for the following morning; two nannies are arranged to look after her children.

The next day, Roberts packs her bags, raids a few ambulances at work for medical supplies and hops on a plane with a black rolling suitcase full of IVs, wound-care items, antibiotics and other first-aid gear.

On the plane she's a bit nervous about the situation she's flying into. Planes aren't landing in Haiti because of the earthquake, so her flight is actually touching down on the other side of the small island, in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, roughly an eight-hour drive to Port-au-Prince.

She's not exactly sure how she's going to cross the border into Haiti, but she's confident she'll find a way to get to ground zero.

2010: Hitchhiking to Haiti

In the Dominican Republic, Roberts meets an American couple at the airport; they tell her she's crazy and should head back home. Other than her suitcase full of medicine and first-aid supplies, Roberts has no concrete plan. She has only three bottles of water, enough granola bars to last a week and some hard candy. She has nowhere to stay once she gets to Haiti.

Roberts tells the couple she's going to Port-au-Prince. They're heading into Haiti, too; she begs them for a ride. At first, they're reluctant to help but finally agree to take her as far as the border between the Dominican Republic and Haiti.

"We don't want to be responsible for you after that, so we'll leave you at the border to catch a ride," the man tells her.

Relieved, Roberts hops into their van and they take off for Haiti.

She is hoping the border will look like the one between Canada and the United States: a bustling place with restaurants, buses, taxis and duty-free stores. As she nears the border crossing by a gorgeous bright blue-green lake and white sand banks, there are no buses and no taxis. The place is deserted.

The couple order her out of the van. Grateful for their help this far, Roberts gets out, and with the exception of one or two border guards, she finds herself abandoned in what feels like the middle of nowhere. She considers walking the rest of the way, but Port-au-Prince is still an hour and a half away by car. Reluctantly, she starts walking. She starts to wonder whether she should give up and return home when the couple's van starts backing up.

"Hop back in," says the man.

An hour and a half later, Roberts arrives in Port-au-Prince.

The physical destruction, the injuries, the death, the horror are worse than she could have ever imagined. Buildings everywhere have been reduced to rubble. The streets are chaotic and filled with frantic-looking people with blood oozing from their various wounds.

She looks over and sees a large pick-up truck carrying lifeless bodies. The truck heads to an area a few miles outside the city to dump the bodies into a mass grave; thousands of unidentified corpses are left to rot.

Soon, Roberts meets some other aid workers: two doctors from Portugal and two untrained nurses from Atlanta, Ga. Together, they set up a temporary hospital next to the remains of Haiti's government buildings—The National Palace—that were flattened during the earthquake.

Around them, 50,000 homeless people are camping under tarps—about 700 miles from Miami, Fla.

Living off granola bars and some hard candies she bought from the bulk section of the grocery store, Roberts doesn't sleep for more than half an hour at a time for an entire week. A never-ending flow of people arrive at the makeshift hospital with missing limbs, wounds that won't stop bleeding and infections of all kinds.

She administers countless IVs. She delivers a baby. And she tries to treat a young girl with maggots living inside one hole above her ear and a second on her forehead. Despite Roberts' best efforts, the girl dies.

Roberts has never seen such necrosis in her life; infections are so bad that the victims' skin dies and turns black, leaving medical personnel no option but to cut it off. She goes into what she calls "paramedic mode"—she stops thinking, puts her head down and gets to work, cutting off parts of fingers, arms and legs.



Courtesy of Julie Roberts



Courtesy of Julie Roberts

Roberts spent her first visit to Haiti treating hundreds of wounded people, many of them newly orphaned children.

"I need to keep it together and treat patients so I'm not going to allow myself the luxury of crying or even processing how massive the carnage is until I get back on that plane," Roberts thinks to herself.

She holds it together better than she expects, though treating children with split-open heads screaming for dead mothers almost pushes Roberts' emotions over the edge as she starts to imagine they are her own children suffering.

After running on sheer adrenaline for seven days, Roberts knows it's time to go home. She has four children waiting for her, missing her. But on the plane, she can't stop thinking about Haiti. She cries her way through the 3,500 miles back to Vancouver.

She knows she has to go back. Soon.



Roberts' four children, three of whom are adopted.

2013: You Can Do It All

Although 35-year-old Roberts is a Canadian citizen, her father did relief and development work in Africa, so she spent much of her childhood living in Tanzania and Kenya, where she learned how to speak Swahili.

She moved back to her homeland as a high-school student and spent her adolescent years living and going to school in Winnipeg, Man. She graduated and began university at the age of 16 and was married by 18. She has been divorced for four and a half years. Roberts admits she's always been independent and somewhat ahead of her years.

At 25, she became the president of Community Builders Group (CBG), a successful nonprofit organization based in Vancouver. She still holds the title today.

Her job is to run the business end of CBG, which owns and operates five rooming houses in infamously drug-ridden Downtown Eastside in Vancouver. The rooming houses provide transitional housing for addicts or poor people looking to get their lives back together. Their work extends beyond just Vancouver; they also fund projects in

a number of countries in Africa and Haiti.

Roberts isn't sure why she has always felt a strong connection to helping the underprivileged in Vancouver but thinks it might be related to her time in Africa.

"I never forgot about Africa," she adds. "In fact, sometimes I think I'd rather live in Africa or Haiti. It's a much simpler life."

She concedes that life in Canada with four kids and two jobs is demanding. When she is home, she embraces the North American life; she's addicted to her phone and she drives her four children around to school and various sports in what she calls "my mom vehicle," a Mazda CX9.

She only gave birth to one of her four children, a boy named Shanán.

In 2006, there was a knock at Roberts' door. It was Carey, one of the women from the women's shelter where she worked at the time. She knew Carey, but not well. Carey asked for a favor: "Will you take my baby? I mean, will you adopt her from me?"

Roberts was stunned but barely hesitated. Carey, a heroin addict, looked so unhealthy, so desperate. Within 40 seconds, Roberts became the mother of a beautiful daughter named Aila.

Her third child, Kiviuk, was adopted in a similar situation.

"I had all three babies, all a year old or younger, lined up in a row on my couch. All three of them stared at me helplessly, innocently," Roberts said. "I wondered what I had gotten myself into."

About 18 months later, Roberts adopted Kiviuk's biological sister, Sura.

Roberts has always felt the need to be more than a mom who works full time and works out five days a week. She has always needed something more to help her feel useful and fulfilled. This need is what drove her to get involved in work overseas.

2013: The Village of McDonald, Haiti

The images from her first trip to Haiti continue to haunt Roberts today. They also compelled her to return to Haiti and continue to help in any way she could.

"If I didn't keep going back and trying to help, even in a small way, I think the enormous injustice and inequality of it all would overwhelm me," Roberts says.

So after returning to Port-Au-Prince a second time to do post-earthquake relief work in 2010, Roberts started looking for a way to become involved in the country in a more long-term way.

She was soon introduced to a woman named Barb McLeod, originally from Vancouver. McLeod explained how she was guided to Haiti spiritually and has been living in McDonald for the last 10 years. McLeod allowed Roberts to get her foot in the door with the locals of the village. The



Courtesy of Emily Beers

According to World Bank estimates in 2005, more than half of Haiti's citizens live on less than US\$1 per day.



Courtesy of Emily Beers

It's been three years since the earthquake, and many villages still lack basic sanitation facilities.

locals have, in turn, been the ones to guide her.

"I never want to make decisions for them," Roberts says. "It's their village, so they have directed me in areas where I can help."

In the last two years, Roberts has funded latrine-building projects and the construction and operation of a pharmacy in McDonald. But some of her most successful projects have been pay-it-forward (PIF) microcredit loans: recipients of the small loans—usually US\$200—are expected to pay the loan forward to another family in McDonald once they make their return on the investment. These microcredit loans have gone a long way in helping families develop self-sustaining small businesses.

Since 2010, Roberts has returned to Haiti a dozen times, for no more than one week at a time.

"I can't go longer than that because I hate leaving my own

children," she says.

But she has a small army of nannies, as well as her parents and her ex-husband, who ensure her children are safe when she is away.

Her long-term plan in Haiti is to continue to make trips to McDonald three times a year, to generate and raise more funds for microcredit loans, to build latrines, and to offer medical assistance where possible. And eventually she hopes to spread the economic development that is helping to transform McDonald to surrounding areas, which are also extremely impoverished.

Roberts made her 13th trip to McDonald this April—this time with an entourage of CrossFit athletes including this author—to check on her projects, as well as to look into potential new projects. The experience was eye-opening for those who saw Haitian poverty up close for the first time.



Courtesy of Emily Beers

Building enough latrines for the people of McDonald will help improve some of the worst health problems in the village.

Haitian Reality

Bumpy gravel roads littered with foot-deep, crater-like potholes lead to McDonald, which feels too small to hold a population of 6,000. That's probably because most of the tiny, one-room houses are home to 10 to 12 people. The houses themselves are made of more sand than concrete because concrete is too expensive.

You can't walk through the village without stepping on garbage. The beach next to the village is covered in tin cans, dirty Styrofoam, water bottles and every other kind of litter imaginable. There's so much garbage that the rocks on the beach are barely visible. It's a far cry from the beautiful beaches that draw tourists to both countries on the island, but Roberts says it's better than it used to be.

To the left of the beach house Roberts rents, barefooted children play soccer. They don't look like they've been washed in weeks. One of them has a big lump in his stomach.

"That lump in his navel means he has worms living inside him," Roberts explains.

One of the boys takes off from the group and walks over to the beach. He rummages around for a container and finds a tin can amongst the waste. He picks it up and sits on it, defecating into the can. The odor wafts into Roberts' backyard.

"Most of the people here don't have any kind of bathrooms," she explains. "This is why CBG has been funding latrine building over the course of the last year."

Roberts adds: "It is getting better. We're building two more latrines for a few families right now."

The boy finishes up and finds himself a piece of scrap paper, which isn't too difficult on "garbage beach." He wipes himself, shoves the paper into the can, walks over to the water and hurls the can 15 feet in the air. It lands in the water with a splash.

It's the ocean's problem now.

Parts 2 and 3 will take an in-depth look at Robert's most-recent efforts in Haiti.



About the Author

Emily Beers is a CrossFit Journal staff writer and editor. She competed in the 2011 Reebok CrossFit Games on CrossFit Vancouver's team, and she finished third at the Canada West Regional in 2012. In 2013, she finished second in the Open in Canada West.