

LES on the Front Line

When a massive earthquake struck Haiti in January, locally engaged staff at Canada's mission rallied and responded to the crisis—even while experiencing their own.

It was a typical late afternoon for Jocelyne Pierre. Home from her job as a designated immigration officer at the Canadian Embassy in Port-au-Prince, where among other things she is in charge of adoptions, she prepared supper and received a quick phone call from her best friend Margarete, still at work in a downtown office. The two made plans to talk later.

Then came a violent shaking that would shatter Pierre's country, as well as her life and the lives of her fellow locally engaged staff (LES) at the mission. The 7-magnitude earthquake that struck Haiti at 4:53 p.m. on January 12 would test the capacities of the LES and the rest of the staff to respond to consular emergencies, and transform the Embassy where Pierre has worked for 38 years.

Barely able to stand, with china crashing all around her, Pierre's first thought was that a bomb had hit her neighbourhood, which is near the mission along Delmas Avenue, one of the city's main thoroughfares. "I thought it was a revolution," she recalls.

When the trembling stopped, she emerged from her house with her husband Jacques and daughter Naomi to find devastation everywhere. The four-story building under construction next door was reduced to sand. Homes were flattened. Making their way along Delmas in the growing dark they saw that the Caribbean Supermarket, where many mission staff shopped after work, had collapsed. "It was a miracle no one from the Embassy was in there," she says. Indeed, no mission employees were injured or killed in the disaster, but many lost relatives and all lost friends.

Throughout the evening, amid aftershocks and confusion, Pierre tried to reach Margarete. But most phone and cellular service had been knocked out. The next morning came news that Margarete's office had collapsed; her body would be found in the rubble eight days later, among the 220,000 people, including at least 46 Canadians, who were killed in the Haiti quake. "It was heartbreaking," says Pierre.

HELPING SURVIVORS

While she could not save her friend or forget her loss, Pierre realized that at the Embassy she could help survivors. She returned to work and over the next several weeks helped to unite more than 200 Haitian children with their adoptive families in Canada—more than double the number typically processed in a year.

Pierre was not alone among LES in her dedication. Despite losing friends and family members, homes and belongings, the mission's 60 LES came to the Embassy in the first days after the earthquake. There, working in the compound and garage of a badly damaged chancery, they responded to a growing number of people who needed everything from care, food and shelter to emergency passports and evacuation to Canada.

One of the first to arrive at work was transportation dispatcher James Louis, who had just started a four-week holiday the day before the earthquake struck. The house where Louis was living with his sister had been destroyed and his niece killed, yet he was determined to return to the Embassy. "Working hard helped me," he explains. He arranged for vehicles to escort evacuees to the airport, carry supplies to the Embassy and move around staff, whose numbers were growing with an influx of temporary-duty employees. For several weeks he loaned his garage office—among the few that could be used in the early weeks—to Ambassador Gilles Rivard.

Overseeing the setting up of such makeshift workspaces was Elco Laborde, the mission's property and goods manager. Laborde's home was also destroyed, yet he, along with his technical team, helped to get the chancery working again and looked after the 21 Canadian staff quarters, five of which were lost and seven damaged.

Furniture and appliances in storage were hauled onto the Embassy grounds and into the garage to act as temporary offices. A kitchen was set up to prepare more than 1,200 hot meals a day, which a cross-section of Embassy staff pitched in to cook, serve and clean up after.

With stores closed, much of the food and water, as well as the tents and umbrellas under which people ate and worked, were sourced by Romy Sobodker, the property assistant at the Embassy. Sobodker's critical local connections meant she could contact business owners directly for such necessities. She also kept track of the supplies coming in from Canada by military aircraft and even helped out consular staff in the first days, drawing up lists of evacuees leaving Haiti by return plane.