

Lending a hand in Haiti

Salem businessman has been helping residents rebuild nation

By Hanna Barry • Statesman Journal • November 14, 2010

- "I didn't have to think about it very much."

These were the words of general contractor Raymond Arana when asked what made him leave his home, family and Salem-area business to join the relief effort in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, three weeks after the Jan. 12 earthquake.

Owner and senior project manager of family owned and operated Western Construction Systems, Arana has been providing on-the-ground assistance and training for the past nine months.

What began as one man taking his trade skills to Haiti has become a team of people providing structural repair to severely damaged buildings, erecting homes and building schools.

Arana was back in Salem briefly this month for the birth of his granddaughter, Avery Arana, and he said that if it weren't for his business partners and sons, Justin and David, he would be unable to do what he is doing.

"There are so many people in the world that only talk about doing things," David Arana said, "and not a lot of people that actually get up and truly go and make a difference ... that is what he is doing and we are supporting him."

Haiti remains in a nightmare. Some 1.3 million survivors are living in refugee camps in and around the capital with no water and little food. An outbreak of cholera already has killed 583 people and hospitalized 9,000 more. And Hurricane Tomas, which tore through Haiti on Nov. 6, is expected to make things worse.

Arana described Port-au-Prince as being in "excruciating poverty" and the refugee camps as "the most unsanitary place I've ever worked in my life."

Relief efforts have been underway since the earthquake hit, but there remains a huge demand for repair and reconstruction, making the work of Relief Team One — Disaster Relief and Reconstruction, even more important. That's the name of the volunteer organization founded by Arana in response to the Haitian earthquake.

He said that his principle always has been to teach people to fish rather than give them fish. Since his arrival in Haiti, he has been training the Haitian people in carpentry and construction skills.

Beginning with two untrained men, Arana has trained 35 carpenters. The carpenters — paid two and a half times the average labor rate in Haiti — built a school in two and a half days at the beginning of October.

Running a Young Builders program for 9- to 16-year-old boys and girls, as well as a Construction Technology and English School, Arana describes students as "hungry for knowledge" and "ravenous to learn the skills."

Under the Young Builders program, Haitians are trained in carpentry and construction by their own people.

The school teaches 80 men and women, between the ages of 17 and 45, for one hour, three times per

week. Haitians who previously did not know how to use a tape measure or a hammer are framing houses. Thus not only is Arana building a lot of houses, but he is teaching people the skills they need to make money and in turn teach to their own children.

Arana plans to return to Haiti on Nov. 22 to continue work on what he foresees as a three-year plan. He will be back home in December for the birth of his second granddaughter, this time to his son, Justin.

Details

Contact Relief Team One at www.reliefteamone.org.

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About Western Construction

Western Construction Systems was established in 1987. It specializes in repair and restoration of concrete, structural repair, basement waterproofing and crack injection. The company also does earthquake retrofitting, providing structural upgrades to buildings to match current standards.

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