

# In a hurry to get back to Haiti

## Survivor in Mass. will bring supplies

By [John M. Guilfoil](#) Globe Staff / January 18, 2010

Kara Telesmanick lost everything in Haiti.

Some of her closest friends died. Her home in a small coastal city near Port-au-Prince and all her possessions were destroyed. But she is safe, after arriving at her parents' home in New Bedford on Friday, and some would say she has no reason to return to the troubled country.

She disagrees.

"The people I live with and care about are there. It's where I live, and I need to go back and help my neighbors and everyone who's suffering right now. I think I can be of some use," she said all in one breath.

Telesmanick, 29, a 2002 Wheaton College graduate who served in the Peace Corps in Bangladesh for two years after college, has lived in Leogane for three years and works with severely malnourished children through the Children's Nutritional Program of Haiti.

Leogane, a coastal city of about 11,500 18 miles west of Port-au-Prince, is near the epicenter of Tuesday's 7.0-magnitude earthquake and was hit hard, with most of the city's buildings leveled and many of its residents killed.

But Telesmanick was in Port-au-Prince when the quake struck, meeting with co-workers.

"We finished our meeting and we were sitting in an outdoor cafe," Telesmanick said in a phone interview yesterday. "It started shaking. We thought it was a truck going by. It was just kind of a blur. As soon as the shaking stopped, I got my telephone and started calling people in Leogane."

Telesmanick and her colleagues tried to drive back to Leogane. After two hours, they had progressed only about a block in gridlocked traffic, so they stopped at a Doctors Without Borders clinic that had set up in the capital city.

"We were doing triage that night," said Ashley Aakesson, executive director of the Children's Nutrition Program. Aakesson is based in Chattanooga, Tenn., but was visiting Port-au-Prince when the quake struck.

Aakesson, a nutritional anthropologist, Telesmanick, with a master's degree in public health, and their college intern, Courtney Latta, rolled up their sleeves and "made themselves useful," Telesmanick said.

“It was horrific, but at least they had supplies. They were able to give people strong antibiotics and morphine,” Aakesson said. “I was filling syringes. Kara was out there in the yard with the patients. There were hundreds of people.”

They worked until 4 a.m., rested - not sleeping - for about two hours, and got back on the road to Leogane. Their vehicle couldn't make it onto the main road, but their Haitian driver, Jean Claude Gilles, spotted a friend driving past with a truck. They rode in the back for the long, slow journey, arriving on the outskirts of the city around 10 a.m.

If Port-au-Prince was horrific, Leogane was a nightmare.

“I've seen a lot of death and tragedy already, but none of what I've seen so far compares to this,” said Telesmanick. “I'm still in shock. I can't even begin to comprehend. I haven't started processing it.”

As she ran toward her apartment in a building within a hospital complex, friends recognized her and approached. Most of them had bad news.

“On the way, somebody told me one of my good friends that I salsa dance with every Saturday had died,” Telesmanick said. “My house was gone. There were injured people everywhere.”

Telesmanick's boyfriend, Guesly Pierre, 30, was there, safe. A couple living in an apartment one floor below hers also got out, though the husband had to crawl out of a hole after being trapped for several hours, she said.

Her three dogs were also safe. “I felt so bad being concerned about my dogs,” she said, choking back tears. “But I was happy to find them.”

The hospital was in shambles, and people lay dead or injured around the neighborhood. Telesmanick and her co-workers started helping the injured, though most of the hospital's medical supplies were destroyed or unreachable. They had only Tylenol and ibuprofen to give to screaming children with compound fractures and multiple broken limbs.

“We found a bunch of cardboard boxes and made splints,” Telesmanick said. “We washed wounds and bandaged them. Anything we could do.”

Throughout the day, Telesmanick learned the names of more and more friends who didn't survive.

Telesmanick's group finally stopped for its first meal in two days: a helping of Plumpy'nut, a fortified, peanut butter-like food that the group gives out to malnourished children.

“I never thought in a million years that I'd be the one needing Plumpy'nut,” Telesmanick said.

“She was heroic,” Aakesson said.

The group stayed and worked until Friday. Weak, out of supplies, and with nowhere to sleep, they accepted a ride to New Jersey on an Air Force C-17 cargo plane.

After a flight from Newark to Boston, and a ride to New Bedford from her father, Telesmanick finally fell asleep.

Now, Telesmanick and her colleagues are coordinating a supply chain into Leogane. She said she'll return with a team as early as this week, when she can make sure supplies are getting there - and once her strength returns.

Although she lost her so many possessions in the quake, she had her laptop, containing data on the work her program was doing in Haiti - with her in Port-au-Prince.

As for the lost belongings, "It's all material things I can get again," Telesmanick said. "I'm focusing on getting money for CNP so we can get as many supplies and people and stuff into Leogane. My life is there."

To learn more about the Children's Nutritional Program of Haiti, visit [cnphaiti.org](http://cnphaiti.org).

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