

Saving lives

one heart at a time

An extraordinary patient also dedicated to saving lives.

It takes more than an earthquake and a near heart attack to stop Joan Conn from saving the children of Haiti.

This long-time Cincinnati resident has devoted the last four years of her life to the issue of child slavery there.

As founders of the Restavek Freedom Foundation, she and her husband Raymond are working to abolish the practice of forcing young Haitian children into involuntary domestic servitude. It's deeply embedded in their culture, but Haitians refuse to acknowledge this as slavery. Instead, they call these children "restavek," which means "stay with" in

French. Some are orphans. Others are given over by their families, who have too many mouths to feed and no possibility of education for their children to work for a "host" family. The Conn's mission, through their Foundation, is to one day end this unjust practice.

But just when they were starting to make headway, a 7.0 earthquake struck the poverty-stricken island on Tuesday, January 12, 2010 at 4:53 p.m.

Luckily, the Conns were spared, but for Joan it was a close call. On January 12th,



Ray and Joan Conn with Child Advocates Nadine and Roslyn and two very special friends, Valery and Dina.



Two children from the program

her husband and son, Clint, were down south in Port Salut. She had stayed in Port-au-Prince to oversee the unloading of a container full of supplies and was supposed to join them, but she was exhausted and decided to spend the night in their Port-au-Prince apartment. When she called her husband to tell him, he pleaded with her to reconsider. "No. Just try to come today. Just try. You can rest when you get here."

Her husband's pleading probably saved her life. She caught the bus and arrived there a mere hour before the earthquake hit.

Even a hundred miles away, the impact was significant. "You know when you get in that state," Joan says as she relives the scene, "where you're half asleep and you don't know what is happening or where you are? I was lying on the bed, and all of a sudden the bed was vibrating and moving, then it started skidding across the floor. I jerked up thinking, 'Where am I, what is this?' Then I looked outside and the balcony was swinging back and forth. People were screaming and yelling and running... it was complete chaos. Nobody knew what was going on. I just grabbed my shoes and ran.

I remember my husband saying, 'This is a major earthquake. If Port-au-Prince is the epicenter, we're in big trouble.' And sure enough, it was."

Their first concern was for the children they serve and their Foundation staff. With the roads covered in debris, it was two days before they could drive back to Port-au-Prince. Once there, they were met by a scene of unearthly devastation. The smell was overwhelming. Haunting images were everywhere.

"All the government buildings were destroyed—just gone. The palace was crumbled. There were dead bodies all over the place. It was surreal, because people weren't rioting or being violent. They were just moving around slowly, stumbling over the bodies, not really even looking at them—it was obvious they were in shock. I imagined it was like the aftermath of a warzone."

The Conns were deeply concerned about the children in their program and made their way to one of the schools. It lay in pieces. "We lost six of our children when this school fell." As Joan speaks, her voice



Significant damage to The Palace

breaks." Others were able to dig themselves out hours after the quake; some with severe injuries, but all with images in their heads they will never forget."

Like so many, the Conns discovered they were homeless. When they finally reached their apartment building, it lay in ruins, and approximately 60 occupants had been killed during its collapse.

Their next thought was the Foundation office. By some miracle, it was spared. The file cabinets and furniture were scattered about, but their computers were intact, as were the supplies that Joan had unloaded on Monday. With a full stock

of hygiene supplies, blankets and most precious of all, 70,000 meals, the Conns set about feeding and sheltering those they came in contact with.

Back in 1972, when Joan and her husband Ray met at Lee University, they could never have imagined that they would be involved in such a wrenching disaster. Their music and faith brought them together at the small, Christian-based college nestled in the foothills of the Appalachians.

They married in 1974. A year later they moved to Cincinnati, where they settled, raising three children, Clint, Desha and Andrew.



The earthquake left significant damage to many area neighborhoods.

Ray started building his construction company, Tri-con, Inc.

Then, ten years ago, a sailing trip changed their lives. The Conns had flown to Port-au-Prince to meet up with their sailboat on the nearby island of Ile a Vache. Once they left the airport in Haiti, before the earthquake, was like nothing Joan had ever experienced.

The roads were so bad, it took nine hours to travel 90 miles. Along the journey, the vista was one of unbelievable poverty: No electricity, no running water, children malnourished, sewage in the street, garbage everywhere. "In my view, I never wanted to go back there again. In my husband's view, something needed to be done. When he made plans to go back, he looked at me and said, "Are you coming?" And I said, "No!" "

In the meantime, Joan was experiencing a conversion. She had read Jean Robert Cadet's book, "Restavek," detailing his own experiences as a child slave. Then she discovered to her amazement that the author lived only three miles away from their Cincinnati home. Joan took this as a sign, and in 2007, together the Conns and Cadet set up a foundation that would eventually evolve into the Restavek Freedom Foundation. Joan had committed herself; Haiti would become her second home.

Their Foundation had been making solid progress when the earthquake struck. Since their apartment was destroyed, they relocated to the Nazarene compound which also housed their office. Conditions were grueling. The temperature was over 90. There had never been air conditioning, and now the air was so dusty, it often blocked the sun. There was no electricity and no fuel to run the generators. The needs were endless, and the work was exhausting. After getting up at 5:30a.m., they would labor through the heat, dust and rubble all day.

Six weeks into the disaster, Joan began to experience tremendous pressure on her chest and neck late one evening.

"Something's not right," she thought. Although she had no previous heart history, she woke her husband and told him, "I could be having a heart attack."

He made his way through the dark to wake a group of nearby emergency room doctors and nurses from Heart to Heart Ministries. They rushed to her side to administer aspirin and nitroglycerin (nitro). She felt better immediately. "I think I'm okay now," she said brightly.

But the doctors knew better. "No. If you are responding to the nitro--that's a sign you're NOT okay." Nitroglycerin opens blood vessels to improve blood flow. It is used to treat chest pain that happens when there is not enough blood flowing to the heart. The physicians realized that Joan was experiencing severe chest pain due to the lack of blood flow. They put her on an IV and started making evacuation plans for the next day. To their relief and amazement, amidst all the turmoil and congestion of the Port-au-Prince airport, there was one seat left on a plane leaving the country.



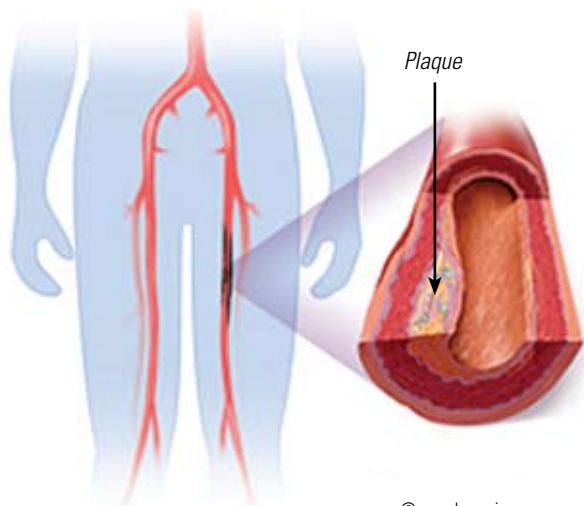
Dr. Dean Kereiakes

Once Joan landed in Miami, she wasn't even sure she could make it through immigration without collapsing. Somehow she managed to get to the nearest emergency room. Although Joan was treated briefly in Miami, she felt the need to get back to Cincinnati to receive high quality care close to home. She made arrangements to fly home the next day.

Meanwhile, Joan's Cincinnati friends had already contacted Dr. Dean Kereiakes, Medical Director of The Christ Hospital Heart and Vascular Center and a physician of The Ohio Heart & Vascular Center. He was out of town, but he took time to alert his colleagues that Joan would be arriving. The medical team was waiting for Joan when she arrived at The Christ Hospital.

"They were wonderful--absolutely wonderful. I thought I had arrived in heaven," she laughs, "I mean everyone--from the person who took my information in the emergency room to the people who took me up to my room. I was coming from Haiti, so it was just night and day. The surroundings and the furnishings and décor and the colors and everything. It was so calming. I really felt so safe once I got there. I felt like, 'I'm going to be okay here.' "

At The Christ Hospital, tests revealed that Joan's pain and suffering was due to a severely blocked artery. On March 3, 2010, Dr. Thomas Broderick, interventional cardiologist at The Ohio Heart and Vascular Center, stented Joan's blocked artery, and Dr. Eugene Chung, cardiologist and nationally recognized heart failure specialist, became her attending physician.



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Thanks to this care and expertise, Joan narrowly escaped a full-blown, possibly even a fatal heart attack.

She allowed herself only four weeks to recover before returning to Haiti. "You can see progress there," she says. "Rubble is still being removed and the infrastructure is still in a dismal state, but the markets are back. People are selling things in the street. Schools are open again."

The Restevék Freedom Foundation is making progress as well. After four years, it's gaining national recognition.

One of Joan's happiest Haitian memories occurred in May. Gary Allegretto, the Harmonic Cowboy and one of the United States' top bluegrass musicians, came to the island with a suitcase full of harmonicas for the children. Over four days, he taught 750 kids to play three songs, "Frere Jacques," "You Are My Sunshine" and the

crowd hit, a Creole rendition of "Happy Birthday," ("joyenx anniversaire"). This was especially poignant, for most of the children have no idea when their birthday is. So Allegretto designated that very day as their "harmonic birthday."

"After so much devastation, it was joyful to hear them laughing and to see the smiles on their faces as they clutched this shiny, new treasure. It was simply awesome."

UNICEF estimates more than 300,000 restaveks live in Haiti today. The century-old practice passes down from generation to generation. But the Conns refuse to accept the idea of child slavery in the 21st Century, a mere 600 miles off the coast of Florida.

They believe education and awareness can break this merciless cycle. That's where the Restavek Freedom Foundation comes in. It provides schooling for the children as well as child advocates and promotes change through public perception.

The Foundation also partners with community leaders and other organizations to set up medical clinics, literacy programs and vocational training for adults and educational counseling on human rights for host families. This fall, the Foundation will open a transitional home to house children



Haitian children are recovering from the devastating events.

trapped in the most abusive situations. They are also developing church partnerships. In fact, The Conn's Cincinnati church, Crossroads provided tremendous support.

"It's a daunting task," Joan admits. "But if I didn't believe child slavery could be eliminated, I wouldn't be doing it. I don't think I'll see it in my lifetime, but I think it's possible in my children's lifetime."

"As you look around Haiti and see one place after the next devastated, all these emotions pour forth simultaneously. You feel grateful, you feel guilty, you feel, 'Why me? Why am I so blessed?'"

Through all the challenges of her work in Haiti, Joan knows she might not be alive to face them if it were not for the physicians and staff of The Christ Hospital and The Ohio Heart and Vascular Center. She has only glowing praise for the physicians who saved her life.

"I think back to when I came out of my procedure and saw my daughter standing there. It made me realize how precious life is. I felt so blessed, like I was surrounded by angels. My friends. My family. And my wonderful doctors. As I was being discharged, Dr. Kereiakes, Dr. Broderick and Dr. Chung actually came by to see me off. I thought, 'How did I rate this?' It was just this feeling of safety. I really had this overwhelming feeling that everything was going to be all right."

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**For more information, go to
www.restavekfreedom.org**

Joan's nationally-recognized physician support team from The Ohio Heart & Vascular Center:



Tom Broderick, MD, FACC



Eugene Chung, MD, FACC



Dean Kereiakes, MD, FACC

