

Breaking the Rules

Category: Across Borders and Cultures
written by Pamela Obi | March 7, 2017

The one rule we were supposed to abide by was to avoid drinking or using water from the faucets. That was our mission's only rule—one that was instinctive, given the recent earthquake.

It was 2010, and Haiti had just experienced a devastating earthquake that had affected hundreds of thousands of people. I was on a mission to Milot, in northern Haiti. It was my first medical mission. I was a bright-eyed, eager second-year medical student anticipating the start of my third-year clinical rotations.

We arrived in Milot in mid-June, when the humidity was at its peak. The volunteer quarters that would be my home for the next few days were located about two blocks from the hospital. The rooms were tidy, and I shared mine with a woman who worked as a medical assistant in the United States. We had no curfew, but we were told it was a good idea to wake up early enough to eat breakfast before heading over to the hospital. Our days began and ended either in the operating room or in the many tents clustered around the hospital.

Each tent housed anywhere from fifty to a hundred people—individuals of all ages and at different stages of the recovery process. Some were post-operative patients who'd had fractures repaired, while others were preparing to leave the tents to search for missing loved ones. I vividly recall the stagnant, stale smell in the tents—but also how quickly it was overshadowed by the feelings of hope and appreciation, but also sadness, that had engulfed the lives of these survivors.

A day or so before I left Haiti, I was nonchalantly brushing my teeth when I realized I had just disobeyed the one rule of the trip—I was using water from a faucet. I ended up with a stomach infection that was daunting and lasted for a few weeks but that eventually resolved after appropriate treatment.

But the infection, the scorching heat, the sweaty bodies and the water restrictions were nothing compared to the smiles on the faces of the children who got pedicures from some of the volunteers or the enthusiastic screams of the boys playing soccer in the evenings.

My experience in Haiti was gratifying and one I hope to repeat.

Pamela Obi
Rome, Georgia