



Airport Rum for Antiseptic: Nurse Offers Care in Disaster

Nurse on Trip to Haiti Gets Caught in Earthquake, Hustles to Save Lives

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Florence Germain travelled to Haiti to bury her father, who passed away on Christmas Day. But in a twist of fate, her journey to Haiti turned into a scramble to save lives.

"It's like a movie, running in my head slowly," she said. "Reliving everything, it's like, 'Did this really happen, did this really happen to me?'"

On Jan. 12, Germain, a 34-year-old registered nurse from Eatontown, N.J., was at the Port-au-Prince airport. She had just handed over the boarding pass for her flight from Haiti back to the United States when she felt the [ground beneath her begin to shake](#).

[CLICK HERE](#) For more on the earthquake.

Her first instinct was to protect her 3-year-old son from the collapsing ceiling, she said.

"I grabbed my son and just covered him under me and ran with him," she said.

Germain said that after what seemed like nearly half a minute of shaking, the quake finally stopped. Immediately, she and her family began looking for a way out of the collapsing airport. Then, they felt the first aftershock.

"Everything was locked down; we started panicking," she said.

Germain and her family eventually found their way to the airport parking lot, where waves of Haitian locals began bringing their wounded in search of medical care.

"They were looking for help, but there was no one to help them there," she said. "Some U.N. trucks were coming. What they could pick up, they picked up. What they could not, they left."

One man arrived in a cab. His leg had been nearly severed from his body. He was in agony; he did not want to be touched, even by those trying to help.

Germain was the one medical professional there. There were no first aid supplies available. She used what she could to fight for the man's life. She doused the wound with airport rum to discourage infection. She used clothing to improvise a bandage. She treated his pain with a bystander's Vicodin.

She offered what little care she could. Then she went back into the city, to the U.S. embassy -- where there were more of the injured.

"Nobody asked me to do anything; I was just assessing the gravity of the situation," she said.

Nurse's Training Guides Response in Disaster

Many might not have responded the way Germain's training as a nurse allowed her to -- and some psychiatrists say that many health care professionals may have chosen their profession because they are drawn to help anyone in emergencies.

In fact, disaster training in professional health care fields has increased in the last 15 to 20 years, according to Dr. Sheila Jowsey, assistant professor of psychiatry at [Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn.](#)

"In a frightening situation, generally people want to leave as soon as possible and find safety," said Jowsey. "The caveat in this situation is that if a person is trained to help others, they're not in such a state of distress; they actually will also have a sense of mastery."

While altruism is indeed part of the nursing profession, according to [Dr. Howard Belkin](#), psychiatrist at [William Beaumont Hospitals in Royal Oak, Mich.](#), Germain's selflessness is more than just defined by her profession.

"Most people think that there's a secondary gain to doing good things, but once in a while people do things only for the well being of someone else," said Belkin.

According to Belkin, most people generally reach out to help people they know -- but some will reach out to complete strangers. And that separates a health care worker from a hero, he said.

"When it happens, you almost work on autopilot," said Belkin. "But when things calm down, then they'll start to think about what happened and that's when anxiety starts to build up."

Provider's Guilt: When There Are Too Many to Help

Germain, now safely back at home, says that she does not consider herself a hero. And even now, she is trying to find a way back to Haiti, checking in with the American Red Cross and other organizations. So far, she has not been able to find a way back.

"I felt guilty that I had to [leave Haiti]," she said, adding that if she had not been traveling with her young son she would have stayed. "My country is a disaster; it needs a lot of help."

Belkin said that often the aftermath of a tragedy can be harder than the crisis itself.

"People feel guilt that they can't completely solve a situation or save everybody," he said. "There's survivor's guilt -- that you survived while the man standing next to you didn't; and the extent of a tragedy is enormous."

Although many health care workers are looking for opportunities to assist in relief efforts, Jowsey advised working with an assembled group of people or an organization that offers support and training before entering a disaster zone. That goes even for Germain, she said, who knows the area and language in Haiti.

"A lot of how a person responds depends on the amount of training and exposure they've had to prepare for disasters," said Jowsey. "If someone had pre-training and a disaster occurs, they are much more resilient in process the events than someone with no disaster work at all."

Indeed, Haiti needs nurses like Germain. The country has a severe nursing shortage -- 77 to 94 times more acute than the ongoing shortage in the U.S. Very few nurses in Haiti have had any disaster preparedness training, according the Haiti Nursing Foundation, the organization that founded the country's only nursing school.

"That is why [Germain's] work, as immediate as it was, is so important to the efforts in Haiti," said Marcia Lane, executive director of the Haiti Nursing Foundation.

According to Lane, nurses play a pivotal role in prevention, education, and treatment in less developed countries.

"I think any nurse who have found themselves in Haiti and have done what they've could as heroes," she said.

'That's Why I Became a Nurse'

"Anytime an individual is in a situation where out of kindness they help others with some degree of risk, it's an admirable thing," said Jowsey. "I'd say admirable."

Germain said she was simply in the right place at a terrible time.

"It just happened that I was there -- that's what I would have done anywhere," Germain said.
"That's why I became a nurse."

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