

First person: Esaue Joachim

As told to Alexis Erkert Depp
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The day of the earthquake I was in school by myself, doing extra work. When I felt the earthquake, I tried to run outside to save myself. When I got to the doorway, the door fell on me, knocking me down and trapping my leg. The school collapsed around me.

At first I thought that I would probably die. But I knew that people knew where I was, so I had hope that they would come find me and save me. There were even people who tried to get me out that night, but couldn't. My cousin was outside in the schoolyard for most of the night to talk to me and keep me company.

I live with my cousin in Leogane, the epicenter of the earthquake, just west of Port-au-Prince. I am 22. I was in my last year of high school. (In Haiti, many families delay their children's education in years when they can't afford tuition.)

On Wednesday morning, the day after the earthquake, my cousin found two people who were willing to help him, and the three of them worked together to dig me out. When they pulled me out, they saw my leg was wounded and took me to a medical center.

Other than an IV, I didn't receive any care that day. On Thursday, I transferred to a hospital where a doctor said that my leg was broken. Hospital staff took cardboard and tied it to either side of my leg to try to keep it straight, but they didn't clean the wound. They asked me to lie down with my leg straight so that the bones could reset. From time to time, staff gave me painkillers.

I didn't see a doctor again until Monday. Then some Japanese doctors told me the leg wasn't actually broken, but the infection was so bad by that time that the only thing they could do was amputate it. I questioned the doctors—isn't there anything else you can do so that I don't need to lose my leg? Finally, they helped me understand that the infection eating the leg left them with no option.

I knew this would have a huge impact on my life. Especially in Haiti, you can't live a normal life without both of your legs. Our government pays no attention to the handicapped. I wondered how I would work, how I would get around if I couldn't walk. I wasn't angry, though, because I knew that at least I still had my life.

On Tuesday they took me to a third hospital where a Cuban volunteer doctor did the operation. I was there for two months for follow-up with the Cuban doctor. They did physical therapy with me. Family members came to visit from Petit Goâve, where my mother lives, and one of my sisters stayed with me for the full two months to help with the therapy and other things I needed.

When I returned to Petit Goâve, I stayed with my

mother. The house that she rented was cracked in the earthquake, so for months we have been sleeping in the community courtyard around the house.

My friends were really hurting for me because I lost a leg. After they showed me how hurt and sad they were, they helped me to see that I still have my life and that I don't need to be discouraged. They gave me courage.

One day I met Canjé Jean Lauture, the founder of the Petit Goâve Handicapped Association or *Asosyasyon Andikape Ti Gwav*. I began to participate in the association's weekly meetings and then became president because I was so interested in the work of the association. I enjoyed having exchanges with people who were in the same situation, and I liked that we came together to look at ways to support people and to find solutions.

Lauture and I looked for nongovernmental organizations that have money to assist people. We knew RNDDH, *Réseau National de Défense des Droits Humains* or National Human Rights Defense Network (an MCC partner), might be willing to help us because they have a good reputation. So I wrote them a letter.

With MCC finances, RNDDH gave us bank cards to give to handicapped people so they could withdraw small amounts of cash each month. People have been able to re-establish businesses. Others have been able to repair their homes. My mother and I used the money to buy land for a house. We'll build the house when we get the means.

There are many nongovernmental organizations that have come to the area to give people food and other supplies. RNDDH is different, because with money people can choose what they want to do with it. When you give people money, you're investing in the people themselves.

I will continue to volunteer with the association to improve the lives of handicapped people, because the work is really important. This organization gives me hope that in the future we can accomplish many things for handicapped people. ■

Esaue Joachim is president of the Petit Goâve Handicapped Association or Asosyasyon Andikape Ti Gwav. As part of its Haiti earthquake response, MCC, through a partner organization, Réseau National de Défense des Droits Humains (RNDDH), or National Human Rights Defense Network, and the Petit Goâve Handicapped Association, provided cash transfers to 204 people with disabilities. Alexis Erkert Depp is advocacy coordinator for MCC Haiti. Linda Espenshade, MCC's news coordinator, compiled this report.

