



Haitian Earthquake Survivor Hopes to Help Others Back Home

By Shelia M. Poole
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
2:23 p.m. Tuesday, September 14, 2010



Guerline Charles poses inside her cousin's home in Fayetteville. She was sitting in her third-floor classroom in Port-au-Prince when the earthquake hit. Guerline was pinned to the ground by her left arm. She was trapped for two days before residents rescued her. Her arm was crushed and later had to be amputated. She found out later that everyone in her class had died. She was the lone survivor.

Guerline Charles was sitting in Spanish class when the walls shook violently, raining huge chunks of concrete and metal down on her and her classmates. Charles was trapped for two days in the ruins of a building in a Port-au-Prince suburb before she was pulled from the rubble by bystanders.

Nineteen of her classmates died in the January earthquake that shook Haiti. Charles, 33, was the only survivor in that class. Today, she sits in the cafeteria at Piedmont Hospital surrounded by one longtime friend and two new ones. She's wearing a bright yellow strapless sundress and a long, yellow and turquoise scarf tied around her hair.

It's a bold statement. She makes no attempt to hide the fact that her left arm is missing. After multiple surgeries in Haiti and aboard a French medical vessel, doctors were unable to save the limb. "An arm is a small price to bear for being alive," said Charles, who switches between French and Haitian Creole. "This is my new life and I have to adjust. I have to get used to it."

Living with a cousin in Fayetteville since she came to metro Atlanta in May, Charles is learning how to do simple tasks all over again. She can bathe herself, work in the yard and cook some of her favorite Haitian meals such as rice and beans and griot, a dish of seasoned pork.

"Her spirit is amazingly great," said her cousin, Frantz Pinet, who along with Embraced, an Atlanta nonprofit, and others, hope to raise \$51,000 to pay for a prosthetic arm. The prosthetic arm is specially designed because Charles' arm was amputated entirely, including all the joints, making it difficult to fit for a prosthetic limb. Recently, Pinet and other supporters organized a concert in her honor that raised more than \$2,000.

Embraced, which collects used orthopedic and prosthetic devices for those in need, is looking to Georgians for help. The group wants 51,000 people to donate \$1 to an account set up in Charles' name, so she can be fitted in time for Embraced's Oct. 2 Virginia-Highland fundraiser, Battle of the Burgers at John Howell Park. Charles will be an honorary judge at the event, and Embraced Atlanta is determined she will be eating a burger with two hands.

"Her goal is to go back to Haiti, to work and to get back to life," said Lauren O'Brien, the founder of Embraced, who calls Charles a friend. "I've learned a bit about perseverance from her and looking at the bright side. Sometimes, she gets emotional, but for the most part, she's been in such good humor." Her nonprofit has donation bins throughout metro Atlanta that are used to collect things like crutches, braces, prosthetics, slings, and Ace bandages. It also will pick up donations of larger equipment such as wheelchairs and hospital beds.

Charles' voice sometimes breaks when she recounts that afternoon when a 7.0-magnitude quake hit the island nation. Charles was taking Spanish in hopes of "communicating better with the world." Charles, who is single, worked for the Haitian immigration office as an information technology worker. Her parents died when she was young, and she was raised by other relatives. In the middle of lessons, Charles said the building started shaking. As students tried to leave the third-floor classroom, the ceiling and walls started falling in on them. She was trapped, face down, in a space that was about shoulder width. She called out to passers-by for help and asked them to call the fire department. They told her there had been a terrible earthquake. People were trapped. Five-story buildings were stacked like pancakes. "They said, 'You don't understand. There is no fire department. There's no emergency service.'"

People tried to free her by chipping away at her concrete prison, but her left arm was pinned under the debris. "I don't know how I tolerated it," she said. "It must have been God. I didn't feel pain at all when I was under the rubble." Her rescuers tried to cut through a piece of iron that was pinning her down, but the saw broke. They had to quit until daylight. At one point, she asked for water, but there was none so someone passed her some beer to quench her thirst.

More than 230,000 people are thought to have perished. But Charles never thought she would die. "I trusted that God," she said. "He kept me going."

Eventually, she was freed, but her arm was crushed. Then the pain hit. Her arm and hand swelled so badly that she begged for someone to cut the sleeve off her blouse. A man put her on his back and carried her more than an hour to the Canapé Vert Hospital, one of the few still operational.

The Atlanta VA Medical Center helped coordinate treatment in Atlanta hospitals for 49 Haitians. Several more, such as Charles, came through private initiatives. Rachel Isons, a native of Haiti, knew Charles and her situation. Isons, a RN at Piedmont Hospital in Atlanta, spoke with Dr. Stephen McCollam, who recently returned from a trip to Haiti to help earthquake victims. McCollam, an orthopedic surgeon, knew the area well. His Atlanta-based practice, Peachtree Orthopaedic Clinic, has a long-standing relationship with the Hospital Albert Schweitzer in Haiti. He had seen injuries from car crashes and people falling from trees, but nothing of this magnitude. There were acute shortages of pain medication, antibiotics and equipment.

He was moved by her story and was instrumental in getting her to the states for treatment.

"She was tough as nails, psychologically," he said. "She needed a doctor who was a specialist and someone to listen to her and bring her closure and peace to her life that everything that could be done was being done." He said her prognosis is good. He said Charles has been an inspiration. "We've all got our problems, stresses and shortcomings," he said. "To see someone like this three months after having an arm ripped apart, then cut off is an amazing story."

She's anxious to see relatives and friends back home and to see how much the country has progressed. She has a higher calling when she returns, she says. She wants to work with other amputees who are adjusting to lives without one or more limbs.

She also wants to find and thank the man who carried her on his back to the hospital. "I think God has a plan for me," she said.

You can make a donation to:
Wachovia Bank
c/o Embraced Atlanta Inc.
Account name: Guerline
Account number ending in 7682