

Daily Astorian, The (Astoria, OR)



January 28, 2010

Haiti bound, again Neahkahnie couple unsure of what they'll find upon their Feb. 8 return to earthquake-devastated nation

In a little over a week, a Neahkahnie couple will, once again, make their way to Haiti.

This time, though, they have no idea what to expect after the island nation was ravaged by a powerful earthquake, leaving over a 100,000 dead and many more injured and homeless.

But go they must, just as they have on five other occasions to lend a hand and do what they can to help.



Retirement, as most retirees will agree, often marks an end to a way of life and the beginning of another. Certainly, that is the case with Neahkahnie residents Anthony (Tony) and Michelle Vinciguerra, who moved to the area from the Boston area in 2001.



In his professional career, Tony was a pediatric dentist for 38 years while Michelle was a nurse. Her career lasted 30 years before she joined her husband's practice and became his office manager.

Nine years later, Tony is still a pediatric dentist and Michelle a nurse. In retirement, the couple has found a new purpose in their lives and could not be happier, even though their new calling keeps them away from Manzanita four months each year.



As part of a mission project, the Vinciguerras have continued to practice their trade the past eight years in the far reaches of Peru and Ecuador, impoverished areas where children have never seen a dentist and where the need is great.

While on an annual mission to Ecuador, they learned about Haiti's situation and have since visited the island nation many times in the past couple of years, growing to love the Haitian people and, more importantly, to perform general dentistry.

They head back to Haiti on Feb. 8 for a week-long stay, not knowing exactly what to expect following the Jan. 12 magnitude 7.0 earthquake that leveled the capital of Port-au-Prince and devastated the southern portion of the country.

"The problem with Haiti is there is nothing there and the government, what's left of it, is corrupt," says Tony, noting the conditions there are the worst he and Michelle have ever seen anywhere in their travels. "It's not a third-world country, it's a fourth-world country."

For the Vinciguerras, the good news from Haiti is that their clinic, located in Juampas (pronounced wum-pah), roughly 60 miles from the devastated capital city of Port-au-Prince, was unscathed.

However, instead of landing at the Port-au-Prince airport, the couple will likely be routed to the Dominican Republic -- which shares the West Indies island of Hispaniola with Haiti -- and make their way by bus to the clinic.

Michelle suspects they will see more adults and families that have moved to the countryside in recent weeks as they abandon their homes in the larger cities.

That is one reason she has maintained her credentials as a practicing nurse, as she never knows what to expect.

In the best of times, Tony sees upwards of 60 children a day, a day that begins at 7:30 a.m. and typically lasts 10 to 12 hours or as long as there is daylight.

"Michelle's my right hand," he said. "She assists me... washes, cleans and sterilizes equipment."

"We perform the same quality of work that children would receive here," said Michelle.

To that end, they bring additional supplies and equipment, including two portable dentistry units each time they visit. The couple pays for their transportation and brings enough food and water each time to last the duration of their stay. Before the earthquake, they purchased bottled water in Port-au-Prince, but that's not an option this time.

"We don't leave anything because it would probably be taken," said Tony. It's not that the Haitians are an evil people, he explained, "they're starving," and anything they see of value becomes a bargaining chip for food. Aside from that, the people are respectful and appreciative of Tony and Michelle's efforts.

"The kids are great," said Tony. "They don't say a peep (while he's working on them) and they always say 'thank you' afterwards."

The same holds true in Ecuador and Peru, though, for the time being, the Vinciguerras won't be going back to Ecuador anytime soon because of the political unrest in the country. The final blow came when their Ecuadorian sponsor was arrested on what Tony's characterized as "trumped-up charges" by the government there for his political beliefs.

Their travels are made easier due to the fact a son lives in Miami. He teaches at St. Thomas University and coordinates three development projects in Haiti. Miami, because of its proximity to the Caribbean and Latin America, becomes a jumping-off point for the next mission and a place to recoup.

As for their decision to retire on the Oregon coast, their daughter, who lived in the Portland area, is partly responsible. Following a visit to Manzanita, Tony and Michelle looked at each other and said, "This is it," the place they wanted to retire. One week after Tony "retired," a moving van with all of their worldly possessions headed west. Destination: the other coast.

It's not exactly the retirement they had imagined, but it's one they would not trade for anything.

Of their mission work, Tony said, "This is the most rewarding thing we've done in our lives. It gives meaning to our lives...we're having the best retirement." That's saying a lot for a dentist who has performed more tooth extractions in "retirement" than he did in his entire 38-year professional career.

Michelle is quick to agree with her husband.

"I'd rather be doing this than go on vacations. It's so rewarding... it's a privilege to serve these people."

SideBar:

Read Michelle & Tony Vinciguerra's appeal to North Coast citizens here .

Caption:

Above: Tony Vinciguerra examines a patient at the clinic in Juampas, about 60 miles from Port-au-Prince.

Middle: A couple of examples of houses in Haiti. Those with metal roofs are considered nicer homes.

Bottom: In stark contrast to Haiti's urban areas, the countryside, in many instances, is green and beautiful.

Courtesy photos

Copyright, 2010, Daily Astorian, The (Astoria, OR). All Rights Reserved.

Record Number: 67455