

Children's Medical Clinic Offers Lighthouse for Haiti's Kids

On Nov. 13, 2000, Danita Estrella heard a doctor yell out, "Has anyone fed this child today?" His cry went unanswered. Entirely overwhelmed by the list of patients demanding his attention, the doctor overlooked the knocked-over juice in a nearby crib, which was causing ants to crawl across the child's face to feast on the spill.

Her name was Erika.

Estrella, founder and CEO of Danita's Children, moved to Haiti in 1999, with a few suitcases and an audacious dream: to rescue and care for Haitian orphans.

The above account was one of Estrella's first experiences attempting to find sufficient medical care on the island—a medical clinic that was five hours away. She had brought Guy, one of the orphan boys in her care who she feared was dying, to the facility because no one could help him. This was her only hope.

The hospital was one of the best facilities available at the time. It was filthy, with blood and dirt caked the floor. Trashcans were overflowing with dirty diapers, used bandages, garbage and who knows what else. The bathroom was a horror—overflowing toilets, feces in the sink.

One nurse clipped the wrong instructions to Guy's IV. Another stapled the wrong x-ray to his chart. When Danita mentioned to a nurse that his IV was not working, the nurse replied, "Shut up and sit down." It was 30 minutes before she returned to fix it.

"In one week, I watched five children die," Estrella said. "I had never been so close to death."

Guy was admitted and placed in a room crammed with 13 rusty cribs all filled with sick children. Estrella visited each of the cribs one by one. Among the dying children was a burn victim, HIV patients, breathing struggles and 5-year-old Erika whimpering from the painful affects of AIDS.

Estrella was determined to show her love, even for just a little while. Everyone was afraid to touch the child because of her infectious disease, so Estrella volunteered to help a nurse as she attempted to administer an IV.

"I watched the nurse struggle over 12 times to get the IV into Erika's vein," Estrella said. "Repeatedly the nurse tried as Erika cried out in pain each time. Throwing her hands up, she looked at me and said in a frustrated tone, 'Take her! Let her die in peace!'"

Estrella placed her gently back in her crib and prayed, "Lord, please do not let this child suffer any longer. She has no one." The next morning, she went to be with the Lord.

"No child should have to die alone, uncared for and unloved," Estrella said. "I made a promise to Erika, to God and to myself, to build a children's medical center in Haiti so children like her will not have to die alone."

As Erika struggled to breathe, a doctor on duty wrote the child's name on a piece of tape and adhered it to her forehead so as to identify her after she died. And then, she passed.

Estrella and Guy left the hospital on Nov. 20, and since that day she has seen many children die from illnesses that could have been treated with preventative medicine or treatment.

Nearly 60 percent of children do not have access to basic medical care, resulting in thousands of deaths each year. Many

clinics simply lack the appropriate resources to treat their patients. One in seven children die before their fifth birthday.

Eleven years later, Estrella is still on a mission to change that horrific statistic. Today she has 104 orphans in her care. Danita's Children provides spiritual, physical and educational opportunities for the children. Currently, almost 500 children are enrolled in Danita's Children's school, 18,000 meals per month are served through the feeding program and many community members attend the campus church.

And she has kept her promise to Erika.

"Today, I look out my bedroom window and I see The Children's Medical Center becoming a reality," she said. "Thousands of children die each year from preventable diseases such as dehydration, drinking filthy water or severe malnourishment."

"This will be available to the whole island," Estrella said. "This will be a lighthouse where they will be able to come. It will be a place where, when people are desperate in the middle of the night, they know they have a place they can go."

This is the largest project that the ministry has ever undertaken and the cost is great. But Estrella testifies that although it seems impossible, a hospital is God's plan for Haiti.

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