

Haitian Earthquake Survivor Realizes Dream in US

On Tuesday, Jan. 12, 2010, Holgen Guerisma was driving a dump truck full of sand up a narrow mountain road 15 miles southeast of Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

A “Jack of all trades,” Holgen worked in construction and also served as a driver and translator for Baptist Haiti Mission.

Ahead, he could see a 15-foot-high rock wall lining the road. He hadn’t quite reached it when his truck started shaking. Thinking he had a flat tire, Holgen came to a stop, just short of the retaining wall. As he looked around, he quickly discovered his tire was not the problem.

“Everything was shaking,” Holgen said. “Trees and everything. I heard people screaming. I realized it was an earthquake.”

He watched the rock wall ahead of him crumble to the ground.

“I saw it all come down and cover the driveway I was going to go through,” said Holgen. “I stood there, stunned. If I wouldn’t have stopped for between seven and 10 seconds, I would have been under the retaining wall.”

A Country in Chaos

Holgen had survived a catastrophic 7.0 magnitude earthquake. Tens of thousands of his fellow Haitians perished; many more were seriously injured. After the quake, the line of people waiting for treatment outside the Baptist Haiti Mission hospital was reportedly five miles long.

In the weeks following the earthquake, thousands of bodies were buried in mass graves. Public transportation came grinding to a halt. Tent cities full of the homeless sprang up in parks and soccer fields.

And that's the small portion of the chaos Brian and Enid Johnson entered into as they arrived in Haiti with the Billy Graham Rapid Response Team. The Wisconsin couple had deployed before to numerous disasters—Hurricane Katrina; flooding in Minnesota and Iowa; deadly shootings in Wisconsin and Illinois—but they had never seen anything like this.

"It was very, very chaotic," Enid recalled the deployment that saw 123 chaplains pray with more than 35,000 Haitians over 22 months. "There were mountains of concrete and retaining rock. When you look at something like that, your eyes really can't believe what you're seeing."

As crisis-trained chaplains, the Johnsons traveled to Haiti to offer emotional and spiritual care to the devastated country. There was just one problem—they didn't speak Creole or French, and very few Haitians spoke English.

That's where Holgen came in.

"We had one driver and three translators, Holgen being one of them," said. "I virtually spent every day with him."

Together, they traveled the region, ministering to the sick and injured in hospitals and to the homeless scraping by in tent cities.

Holgen served as driver, translator or both. Usually, there were several people in the van, but one time, it was just Holgen and Brian.

"That's when I had the chance to ask Holgen if he had a dream," Brian said.

'I Gave Up'

Holgen did have a dream once. Nearly 10 years earlier, he had even written it down, at the urging of his mother. She had always encouraged her children to write out their dreams at the beginning of each new year and pray about them often.

Holgen's dream was to study telecommunications in the United States. He wanted to master the skills that could ultimately improve the infrastructure in his own country.

A lifelong believer who was heavily involved in Baptist Haiti Mission, Holgen hoped to earn one of two annual BHM scholarships to Liberty University in Virginia.

Problems with his birth certificate delayed Holgen from applying for the scholarship. After a lengthy, costly process, everything was finally cleared up. He thought he had made it just in time. Then, BHM dropped its scholarship cutoff age from 26 to 24. Holgen was 25.

"It was heartbreaking," Holgen said. "I thought, 'Oh, that's done.' I gave up."

He had long since lost the piece of paper that held his dream. Now it seemed the dream itself was lost as well.

Holgen didn't usually talk about that part of his life, but he shared his story with Brian, only opening up because he was asked. Brian listened, prayed with Holgen and said goodnight.

'We Can Do That'

As he returned to his temporary home that evening, Brian couldn't stop thinking about Holgen and his dream, so he shared what he had learned with Enid.

"And when I told my wife about the story, she said, 'We can do that.'"

Guided by prayer, Brian and Enid hatched a plan to get their new friend to the United States and enroll him in a telecommunications program. But they didn't say a word to Holgen.

After spending a month in Haiti, the Johnsons headed home to Frederic, Wis., and started researching telecommunications programs.

"This was a 'God thing,'" said Brian. "One of the top schools in the entire nation is 40 miles from our home. They were just absolutely wonderful, the people over there. They all got on board with this right away."

With the initial details settled, it was time to give Holgen a call.

"They let me know God had put it on their heart to help me with pursuing my dream," Holgen said. "On the other end of the phone, it was like, am I really hearing what I'm hearing right now? I could have died from a heart attack."

The Johnsons sent Holgen a link to Wisconsin Indianhead Technical College in Rice Lake. As soon as he checked out the program, he was ready to go.

The process of getting Holgen a visa and making travel arrangements was incredibly challenging, but one step—and one prayer—at a time, it all came together.

"It took us 18 months and tons and tons of hurdles, but the joy of it all was seeing God show up each time," Brian said.

The Dream Resurfaces

On Aug. 5, 2011, Holgen prepared to board a plane for the United States.

As he gathered his documents, he decided to take one last look in the drawer where he kept his important papers.

"I'd been in there very often, probably one time a week," Holgen said. "I thought, 'Let me take a last look—just a last check.'"

The first thing he saw as he opened the drawer was the sheet of paper with his dream on it. He hadn't even thought about it in years, assuming it was gone. But there it was.

"And I just sat there and cried," he said. "Because it was

like God told me, 'You gave up on me. You didn't think I could do this for you.'"

Life in the States

When Holgen landed in Wisconsin, he found that the Johnsons had thought of everything. They provided him with a car to drive to and from school. They also gave him their finished basement, complete with a kitchenette, bathroom, and bedroom of his own—an emotional surprise for Holgen, who told the couple he assumed he'd be living in a closet.

The Johnsons got a surprise, too. When they took Holgen to a local eye doctor, they found out he was nearly blind.

"And he was our driver, by the way!" Brian said with a laugh.

A pair of glasses literally gave Holgen a new outlook on life.

The glasses came in handy as he hit the books. Described by Enid as a "perfectionist," Holgen wasn't satisfied with anything but straight A's at school. He was often up late studying.

Despite his packed schedule, Brian and Enid tried to show their house guest as much of their corner of Wisconsin as possible. Holgen learned to hunt, fish and play the piano. He was also a guest speaker at several local churches. And, with the help of his kind hosts, he even squeezed in a honeymoon with his new bride, Marjolein (Van Doorn) Guerisma.

The two married just before Holgen left for Wisconsin. They met when Marjolein, who is from the Netherlands, was working as a missionary in Haiti. She's currently teaching elementary school in Holland, but they hope to be permanently reunited soon.

In the meantime, Holgen is truly part of the Johnsons' family. Case in point: a new figure popped up on a drawing of a family tree by Brian and Enid's youngest grandson. The new addition

turned out to be Holgen, grafted in as a brother.

Abundantly More

In May 2013, Holgen graduated with a degree in telecommunication technologies from WITC-Rice Lake. He was No. 1 in his class—a group of about 15 tight-knit students he grew to love. It was that love that led him to share the gospel with every one of them before they graduated.

Making graduation day even more special was a guest who traveled thousands of miles to be in attendance—Holgen's mom.

The graduation speaker had her stand up and be recognized for coming all the way from Haiti.

She had encouraged her son to dream. That day, she saw his dreams come to fruition.

With his education under his belt, Holgen is hoping to spend one more year in the U.S. to gain some on-the-job training before heading home to Haiti. He's currently waiting to find out whether the U.S. government has approved his request.

Whatever happens over the next year, Holgen and the Johnsons know it'll be for the best. God has come through time and again. They can't imagine not trusting Him once more.

In fact, the Lord has provided so much, Ephesians 3:20-21 has become the family's rallying call.

"Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen" (ESV).

"I have seen this in my life every day," said Holgen. "God can really do abundantly more than what we ask."