

Drawn to Haiti, St. Paul couple build clinic for children

A St. Paul couple developed a clinic for children that provides well-baby checks, immunizations, food and more.

By Kevyn Burger Special to the Star Tribune

JANUARY 28, 2017 — 5:53PM



Jeff and Michele Boston of St. Paul are primary funders of the Minnesota-based nonprofit No Time for Poverty.

Michele Boston can't explain why she became "a junior Haitian historian" while still a schoolgirl. But for her entire life, she's been fascinated and horrified by the juxtaposition of the island's rich history and extreme poverty.

So it was in Haiti that Boston and her husband, Jeff, decided to focus their charitable efforts.

"Haiti tore at our heartstrings," she said. "We have been successful in business [Boston Health Care Systems] and made a decision to give it away."

Although they are supported by donors and partners, the Bostons are the primary funders of a Minnesota-based nonprofit, No Time for Poverty. In 2009, the St. Paul couple broke ground on a medical center in the remote southwestern region of the country. Now, the clinic, which focuses on children, employs a Haitian medical staff of 38 doctors, nurses, social workers and support employees.

"We are making a measurable difference," Michele Boston said. "Prior to our being there, the nearest hospital was a fee-for-service facility. If you couldn't pay, you would not be seen. We never turn anyone away because they can't pay."

Every day, 70 Haitian children visit the 9,000-square-foot clinic, which provides services from well-baby checks and immunizations to supplemental food to halt the effects of malnourishment.

The Bostons' efforts represent a small drop of hope in a very large bucket.

Haiti remains the poorest country in the Americas, its chronic problems only worsened by a devastating earthquake in 2010 and a hurricane six years later. A 2015 report from UNICEF found that Haiti had the highest infant and maternal death rates in the Western Hemisphere and an estimated 340,000 orphans.

The youngest orphans, the babies, have specific nutritional demands. Without access to mother's milk, they must rely on formula, imported at great expense. And that has created a problem for the nonprofit.

"There's a taboo against anything but mother's milk for infants," Michele Boston said. "Organizations that support us are unwilling to support buying formula."

That stems from a worldwide boycott that began in the 1970s, when protesters objected to Nestlé aggressively promoting formula over breast-feeding in developing countries. Later, the World Health Organization created a code to restrict selling formula in some countries.

Boston is hoping to find individuals or organizations who will make designated donations to buy formula.

"We take the responsible position of supporting breast-feeding. Formula is expensive and doesn't have the nutrients of mother's milk," she said. "But when there is no mother in the picture, what are we to do?"

Kevyn Burger is a Minneapolis-based freelance broadcaster and writer.