

The smell of *life*

—Bethanie Burkholder,
CAM's Nurse Practitioner in Haiti
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“Do I smell like dead bodies?”

That was one of the first questions Steven Shankster asked his wife, Susannah, when she joined him here in Haiti after the earthquake. He had come the previous week and was helping to coordinate CAM's mobile medical clinics.

Susannah thought he did a little. It was no wonder. CAM's base is located just a few miles from the mass graves. On the daily drive from our base to Port-au-Prince where the clinics were held we drove past the burial sites, catching glimpses of arms and legs poking out from an embankment of dirt along the road. The stench was potent.

Our mobile clinic was surrounded by collapsed buildings and their crushed inhabitants. As we worked to provide medical care to those who were injured, others across the street continued to dig through rubble, gradually uncovering a hand, an arm, a body.

Caring for the living brought its own smells. People with injuries came with homemade dressings saturated in pus that had not been changed for three days. There were wounds with gangrene and layers of dead, rotting flesh. Even the living seemed to be permeated by death—dead tissue, dead limbs, dead dreams.

Yet it was not the death that made the strongest impression on me. It was the life—the life of the body of Christ.

I saw it in the compassion and sensitivity of the men who came to help with search and rescue efforts. Within a few hours of when the earthquake hit they made plans to come. Then instead of assisting with search and rescue as they had planned, they ended up helping in the clinics. They held the hands of those undergoing painful wound cleaning. They read books to children in an attempt to distract them from painful procedures. They put their arms around people facing yet another traumatic experience and stayed there with them until their wound care was completed. We helped to facilitate wound healing. They helped to facilitate soul healing.

Children who came shrinking in terror the first day and howling in protest over our slightest efforts at providing care came back the second day eager and smiling, trusting and calm.



I saw it in the care the EMTs and paramedics provided to our patients. The wounds they treated were often deep and severe, filled with the fine powder of crushed cement block, requiring time for proper cleaning. They spent hours sitting on the ground in front of a patient, cleaning foot wounds, or bending over them, cleaning arm wounds. They didn't rush through patients, but took their time with each one: picking out maggots; gingerly, carefully cutting away dead flesh with a razor blade; gently, ever so slowly working the big flap of loose skin on one man's scalp back into place after it had slid back about an inch and was beginning to heal there. I was blessed by the patience, tenderness, and dedication of those men.

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One young lady had a severe wound to her foot and large burn-like blisters over both hands. She seemed so extremely traumatized. She was crying, a desperate look in her eyes,

trembling all over, "They're going to cut off my hands!" She was apprehensive and jittery.

We took a bit of time with this lady. "It is okay. We will only do as much work on your wounds as you allow us to do. If you are having too much pain you can let us know. We'll take a break. We won't cut off your hands. They look like they'll heal." The EMTs worked gently, slowly. It was amazing to see the transformation. Soon she stopped trembling. She became relaxed and at ease, trusting.

Those men cared for people as if they were caring for a prince or for the Prince. That was Life at work.

Often free clinics in Haiti are characterized by chaos, desperation, and crowds. The sense of peace, organization, and calm prevailing at our clinic is a mystery to me, but it was such a blessing, another sign of the presence of the Prince of Peace, I think.

Although our team may have smelled at least slightly of dead bodies and rotten flesh I like to think those smells were way overpowered by another smell. And I'm not talking about the Vicks some of us opted to smear underneath our noses at opportune times. I'm talking about the smell of a sweet-smelling sacrifice acceptable and well-pleasing to God.

Continue to pray for the thousands of homeless in Port-au-Prince and for CAM staff in Titanyen who keep going and going, giving and giving, despite the trauma they themselves have experienced in the past few weeks.

A CAM team member looks at a Bible story book with a young boy to distract him from the pain.

