

Heart

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ened the growing ties between Children's and St. Damien Hospital, the only pediatric hospital in the impoverished nation of Haiti.

Sister Judith Dohner, a nun who grew up in Akron, was working at the children's hospital in Port-au-Prince as it recovered from a massive earthquake that devastated the region two years ago.

Dr. Jeff Kempf, an emergency medicine physician at Children's, heard about the desperate need in the Haitian hospital from a relative of Dohner's who also works in the ER.

Kempf knew he was called to help.

He and his wife, Dr. Ellen Kempf, director of the Akron Children's Hospital Oak Adoptive Health Center, had already devoted much of their medical careers to caring for needy children across the globe.

The couple made their first trip to Haiti together as volunteers about 25 years ago.

In the years that followed, they took numerous mission trips to Africa, Central America and other places where they were needed across the globe.

As Haiti struggled to recover from the 2010 earthquake, Jeff Kempf organized several trips to bring medical supplies and volunteers to St. Damien Hospital.

While volunteering at St. Damien, the Kempfs watched helplessly as a 10-year-old girl was sent home to die.

The girl was born with a hole in her heart — something that would be easily fixed with a single surgery if she were living in the United States. Instead, she was sentenced to a slow, suffocating death.

"We saw kids in the clinic who were dying of things we never would let happen here," Ellen Kempf recalled.

When Jeff Kempf learned about the Gift of Life program from a Florida hospital that has provided surgeries for some St. Damien patients, he realized they could at least help one child or two at a time.

The Gift of Life

Since forming in 2003, the local nonprofit group has helped bring nearly 50 children from throughout the world to Northeast Ohio for lifesaving heart surgeries. Previous procedures were performed at Rainbow Babies and Children's Hospital in Cleveland.

Akron Children's Hospital President and Chief Executive William Considine quickly agreed to participate.

He had seen the need for medical services in Haiti when he joined Jeff Kempf and other volunteers on a trip to St. Damien Hospital in November 2010.

During his visit, Considine participated in one of the daily funerals as a pall bearer for a young man who died from cholera.

"That's one of those events that's life-changing, quite hon-



Dr. Jeff Kempf kisses 17-month-old Kurtis Petion during a family birthday party for Elie Pierre, 4, at the Kempf home. The family's dog Gus also participates in the festivities.

KAREN SCHEIHY/Akron Beacon Journal



SOURCE: U.S. Geological Survey
McClatchy/Tribune

estly," he said.

Elie and Kurtis were among some 50 young patients at St. Damien Hospital with heart problems who had echocardiograms performed by volunteers from Children's during a visit to Haiti last year.

After reviewing the cases, the Children's cardiologists and cardiac surgeons agreed: Elie and Kurtis should be the first to come to Akron from Haiti for care.

"I think it's miraculous the way it happened," Dohner said, "and that it's Akron."

Both boys had serious defects that could be fixed with relative ease, without the need for intense follow-up care after they returned home.

Kurtis, the youngest of the two, was born with a hole in the wall that separates the right and left ventricle in his heart — a defect known as a ventricular septal defect or VSD. As a result, his heart was failing.

"The heart has to pump all that extra blood around," explained Dr. Philip Smith, clinical director of the Heart Center and division director of cardiovascular surgery at Children's. "That causes these children to have a very difficult time growing."

Kurtis needed open-heart surgery to fix his birth defect by placing a patch on the hole.

Elie had a PDA, or patent



TED STEVENS/Special to the Beacon Journal

Denso Gay (center) interprets for Dr. John Clark (left) and Dr. Jeff Kempf as they talk to the parents of Kurtis Petion and the mother of Elie Pierre at St. Damien Hospital in Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

ductus arteriosus. The condition happens when the blood vessel that allows blood to go around a baby's lungs in utero doesn't close shortly after birth.

When a ductus is as large as Elie's, it can lead to lung damage and heart failure.

"Their lifespan is shortened by decades," Smith said. "... If you close this blood vessel off, you remove all of these risks."

Gift of Life patients usually come to America for their surgeries with at least one of their parents. But because of government rules in Haiti, Elie and Kurtis had to leave their parents behind.

Coming to Akron

Jeff Kempf offered to travel to St. Damien with several volunteers from Children's to work at the hospital and then

bring Elie and Kurtis to America.

Denso Gay, an interpreter and coordinator for volunteers and visitors at St. Damien, agreed to accompany the boys as their interpreter, caregiver and legal guardian. Though he'd never met the boys, the Haiti resident knew "Dr. Jeff"

HELP FOR ST. DAMIEN

Dr. Jeff Kempf, director of the Office of Pediatric Global Health at Akron Children's Hospital, is organizing a fundraiser to benefit St. Damien Hospital, the only pediatric hospital in Haiti.

The event will take place 6:30 p.m. Oct. 12 at St. Nicholas Banquet Center, 755 S. Cleveland Ave., Mogadore.

Father Richard Frechette, Haiti national director for Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos (NPH), will be the featured speaker.

St. Damien is an NPH health program. The international mission also runs an orphanage in Haiti.

The cost for the event is \$75 per person or \$1,000 per table. For information, email stdamiensfundakron@gmail.com

or call 330-668-3922.

For information about NPH's efforts in Haiti or to donate, go to www.nph.org/ws/homes/home.php?lang=en&haiti.

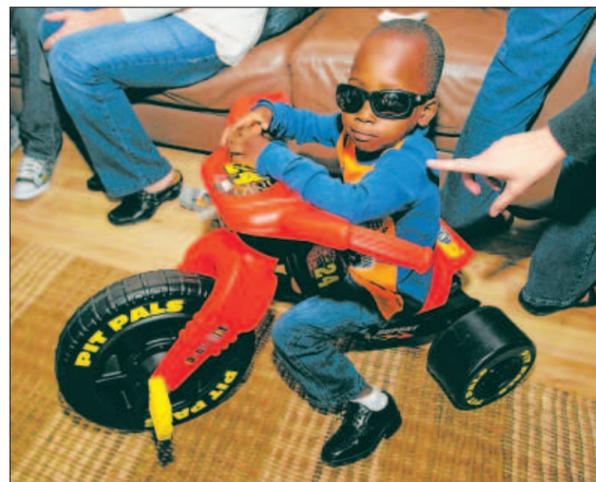
To learn more about St. Damien Hospital, go to <http://saintdamienhospital.nph.org/>.

Gift of Life North East Ohio Inc. also is seeking donations to bring more children from Haiti and other countries to Akron Children's Hospital for heart surgery.

Tax-deductible donations may be sent to Gift of Life North East Ohio, 31 Louise Drive, Chagrin Falls, OH 44022.

For information about the charity, visit www.giftofflifeinternational.org.

— Cheryl Powell



KAREN SCHEIHY/Akron Beacon Journal

Elie Pierre, 4, sports shades as he rides a bike around the home of Drs. Jeff and Ellen Kempf. Elie is in Akron for heart surgery.

and many of the other volunteers from Children's from their work at St. Damien.

Gift of Life arranged for American Airlines to provide plane tickets for Gay and the boys for their journey to America.

Typically, the charity also pays for patients and their families to stay at a Ronald McDonald House when they come to America for medical care.

In this case, the Kempfs opened their Fairlawn house to Gay and the boys.

It was a decision the couple never discussed. Both assumed it was something they would do, even before they knew the boys' names.

After raising three adult children, the couple would become stand-in parents to a toddler and a preschooler from

another country. They would borrow strollers and high chairs, collect donated clothes and fill their home with diapers, juice boxes and toy cars once again.

They would take the boys to doctor appointments and tests, with Ellen Kempf serving as their pediatrician during their stay.

They would love and care for the kids as their own until the boys had their surgeries and then recovered enough to go home.

"It's going to change their lives," Jeff Kempf said. "There's no doubt about it."

"For them," his wife agreed, "it's changing the world."

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