

Nurse doesn't miss a beat when it comes to good causes

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Angela Howell-Edgerly was a nurse at Hoag Hospital in January 2010 when the 7.0 magnitude earthquake struck Haiti.

Trained to save people's lives, she watched helplessly as the TV news reported that tens of thousands were dying a world away.

She decided to do something about it.

Howell-Edgerly was struck by how many of the earthquake's survivors appeared without shoes in the reports.

So she organized a massive shoe drive for the victims. Three years later, she returned to Haiti with her 9-year-old son, Dylan, to teach CPR at a Port au Prince orphanage.

It wasn't her first time helping people a world away.

TO SEE THE WORLD

Howell-Edgerly, now 43, came to the United States in 1990 at 20 years old from her native England, with \$300 in her pocket and a place to stay, with a cousin in California. Within four days, she landed a job, as a live-in nanny in Irvine.

"I didn't have much at all ... but I knew I could make it work," she recalled. "I always had that positive outlook."

In England, she'd worked in an intensive care unit at a children's hospital and loved it, and that eventually led her to nursing and Hoag Hospital. It also led her to her husband, Chris Edgerly, who worked at the hospital as an emergency room medic.

Edgerly is now a film set medic and also part of the state's Disaster Assistance Medical Team, which works with the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the California Department of Public Health to respond to disasters ranging from Hurricane Katrina to the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy.

Shortly after starting work as a nurse, Howell-Edgerly hopped on board for volunteer trips to Rwanda, then Kenya, helping in hospitals with far fewer resources than those in the States.

"You go from having everything available to you to very little," she said. "We were shocked."

Yet, even with little, the people Howell-Edgerly met were still smiling, she said.

Haiti was a different story.

WITHOUT HOPE

Though it was eight months since the earthquake, Haiti was still upended.

"There was trash burning in the street. There was rubble everywhere you looked. You couldn't even tell what was a street," Howell-Edgerly said.

The devastation and lack of hope was evident in the Haitians' faces.

“People were dying of starvation,” she said. “I don’t think they knew what to do next because a lot of aid didn’t get to them right away. Tent cities were everywhere.”

Months before, when Angela saw so many of the survivors in news reports without shoes, she thought immediately of the risk of infection.

She organized the shoe drive, and Hoag doctors, nurses, staff and even patients donated almost 3,000 pairs. She didn’t stop there.

She asked for help from people she knew, the Costa Mesa Fire Department and Davis Magnet School, Dylan’s school. Three thousand pairs grew to 14,000, then 22,000. She stored the shoes in her garage but ran out of room and rented a storage locker.

Eventually, she learned of an organization that could help. Soles4Souls, based in Nashville, Tenn., distributes new and used clothes and shoes in the United States and overseas. She traveled to Port Au Prince and the shanty town neighborhood of Cité-Soleil with them.

“I had no idea the impact of a pair of shoes,” Howell-Edgerly said.

Shoes meant protection from infection, but they also meant access. Shoes, not just the flip-flops common in hot climates and developing countries, are required to attend school in Haiti, she said. And education for younger Haitians means the chance to lift their families out of poverty.

“It’s something that’s so simple. It doesn’t take much,” she said.

Even so, Howell-Edgerly left Haiti feeling there was much more to do.

A NEW FOCUS

Then her heart stopped beating.

The symptoms of her heart problem, a heart arrhythmia, surfaced when Howell-Edgerly was still in her 20s. She would feel lightheaded and lose consciousness. Her heart would race from 270 beats a minute, then plummet to 40.

A pacemaker was installed, but eventually that wasn’t enough. An active jogger, Howell-Edgerly would black out on her runs and her heart would drop to a dangerous 20 beats per minute. In 2009, she went into surgery at Hoag for an ablation, to burn the heart tissue to create a new pathway for the blood and control her heart rate.

Her heart stopped on the operating table. Luckily, she was in the right place. She awoke with both a pacemaker and defibrillator implanted in her chest – and a new focus.

“Being a nurse and knowing how important defibrillators are, I did some research and saw there are not that many in the community,” Howell-Edgerly said.

That experience spawned Rescue Heart Foundation.

Howell-Edgerly took a break from nursing and established the foundation as a non-profit about a year and a half ago to get automated external defibrillators, or AEDs, into more places.

In August, Howell-Edgerly and her son Dylan brought an AED to Maison des Enfants de Dieu, a Port Au Prince orphanage of about 80 children, mainly those who lost parents and relatives in the 2010 earthquake.

Alongside his mom, Dylan helped teach the children and staff CPR and how to use the AED.

WHOLE OTHER WORLD

Howell-Edgerly described her upbringing outside Birmingham as middle-class and relatively sheltered. She wanted Dylan to have a wider view.

“I wanted to expose him to that whole other world that’s out there. That there are people that are starving and don’t have food. He has so many choices,” she said.

“Why are the children so loud?” Howell-Edgerly remembers her son asking once they arrived.

“They don’t have parents, and they’re trying to be heard. They want to be heard,” she answered.

Christy Guenther is the one-woman show behind For His Glory Outreach, the Texas-based organization that raises money for the orphanage. She was there when Dylan and Howell-Edgerly visited.

Having the defibrillator, along with the CPR training, is invaluable for the orphanage, Guenther said.

“This will allow us the opportunity to save a kid’s life or a nanny’s life” or even a passerby who needs help, she said. “It’s life-changing for us to have something that valuable.”

Rescue Heart has already placed a defibrillator locally, with the Boys and Girls Club of the Harbor Area. A third is due to be placed in Central Park in New York City in February.

It could have saved Lauren Zussman's life.

LIFE CUT SHORT

Zussman, a 26-year-old model living in New York City, was jogging with her fiancé in Central Park in 2008 when she collapsed.

She likely had suffered a cardiac arrest, said her mom, Lynda Zussman, a Newport Coast resident.

“Had there been a defibrillator, she would very possibly be here today,” Lynda Zussman said. “You only have five minutes when you go into cardiac arrest.”

An ambulance took 15 minutes to reach her.

Lynda Zussman met Howell-Edgerly shortly after her daughter’s death, after learning about her efforts to spread the availability of AEDs.

The two women will travel to New York City in February with their families to place the AED in Central Park.

“Defibrillators can save thousands of lives, especially in parks,” Zussman said. “Angie is just another angel.”