



Photos courtesy of RICO SELGA

Haitian women line up for food in Port-au-Prince.

NURSE *to the world*

Clark College grad honored for humanitarian trips

By **TOMVOGT**
Columbian staff writer

In Haiti, Rico Selga found another kind of terrible.

The Vancouver nurse was part of the response to the earthquake that devastated the Caribbean nation. Selga spent three weeks with a delegation from Portland-based Medical Teams International, treating the sick and injured in impromptu clinics.

It was his latest international relief assignment over the last 10 years, a record of humanitarian service that prompted Clark College to recognize Selga last week as its 2010 outstanding alumnus.

Selga worked with orphans in Kosovo 10 years ago, following the war in the Balkans, and has made five trips to Africa.

"They're all different kinds of terrible situations," Selga said. "With the orphans in Kosovo, people did that, and those children will be orphans for the rest of their lives.

"Liberia is just poor. On a good day, people eat once. It isn't a sexy topic," Selga said, and it doesn't get a lot of attention from the global relief community.

"Haiti seemed so random and undeserved," Selga continued. "Why an earthquake, when it is already struggling so much?"

That was a question that continued to haunt Selga after his return. Eventually, Selga said he started to view his trip through the philosophy of no pain, no gain.

And it wasn't the physical side of the experience that left its mark on Selga — although there was plenty of that.

"I was emotionally drained," he said during a recent conversation in Clark's Foster Hall, where Rico and his wife, Jennifer, own the Coffee Lounge espresso stand.

"I was angry. It was overwhelming, the amount of work to be done," he said.

Selga did a presentation on his trip in the Foster Hall auditorium recently, and it helped him work through some of those issues.

"I'm a lot better now," he said. "That night was helpful. I hadn't spoken about it. People would ask, 'How'd it go?' and I'd say, 'Fine.'"

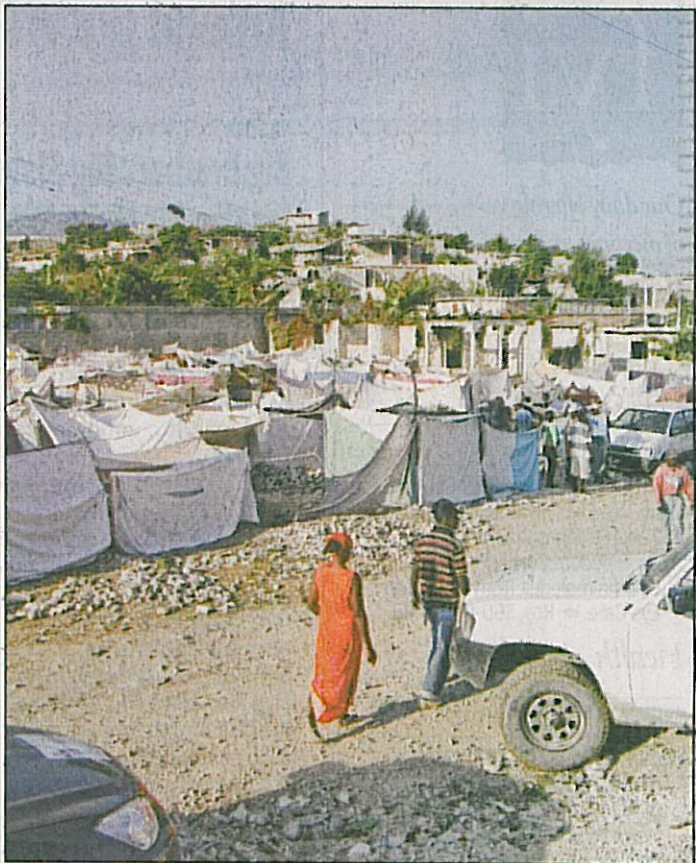
Now Selga said he can see the value



Rico Selga examines a patient in a clinic set up at a church in Carrefour, Haiti.

Did you know?

■ Other Clark College Alumni of the Year include environmentalist Denis Hayes, former state senator Al Bauer and former U.S. Congressman Don Bonker.



Courtesy of RICO SELGA

A tent community in Port-au-Prince.

Alumni:

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in the experience. Rather than just watching it on TV, Selga said, he did something.

Selga, 35, graduated from Mountain View High School, then got his two-year degree from Clark College in 1998. He completed the nursing program at Washington State University Vancouver.

In Haiti, "There were days I functioned as a doctor," he said.

It was a place where the amount of help available could never meet the demand.

"It's hard" to try to pace yourself, he said. "There is a sense of obligation to work. I've seen volunteers overdo it. Your judgment gets impaired when you're emotional and tired.

"A lot of people worked tired or sick or sleep-deprived. But you're the person they sent to help," so volunteers had to take care of themselves, too.

"I took a couple of days off after 2½ weeks. I was wiped out," Selga said. "I had breakfast and went back to bed. Then I had lunch and went back to bed. I never realized

how tired I was."

Personal safety was another issue that added to the strain. When the team arrived in Port-au-Prince, the volunteers were taken to a walled compound surrounded by 20,000 refugees.

Selga walked around the interior, finding exits and looking for possible hiding places.

"I think about worst-case scenarios," he said. "What would I do if people tried to enter?"

That night, when it started to rain, people without shelter started to pound on the gates.

"They were chanting, 'We want tarps!' Finally the Mexican marines showed up. After that, we went back to Port-au-Prince every night."

But the death of a teammate was the biggest emotional blow, when Matthew Bouthillier died on March 1 of heart failure.

Selga said he had just been talking with the 36-year-old emergency-room nurse from Issaquah. Bouthillier was sorry that he missed his son's birthday because of the trip to Haiti.

"Matt said he was going to tell his son that he'd make it up to him, how he'd take him along on a trip so his son could help people, too," he said.