

## Making a Difference

# To Haiti With Love

Grieving parents establish an orphanage in memory of their daughter.



➔ **THE JAN. 12, 2010**, earthquake killed as many as 316,000 people in Haiti, including Len and Cherylann Gengel's 19-year-old daughter, Britney. The Worcester, Mass., couple could have plunged into despair. Instead they chose a path of growth, setting an example of strength for their sons, Bernie and Rich, now 21 and 18, respectively.

At first the Gengels thought Brit had survived. Representatives from her school, Lynn University in Boca Raton, Fla., called Len Gengel and told him she was being helicoptered to the school. He was tragically disappointed upon arrival there when he was told they had rescued a different girl. So 10 days after the quake, Len went to Haiti to find Brit. "It was hell on earth, the smell of death throughout.... We got off a bus at the U.S. Embassy, and they gave us a facemask and Vicks to put under our noses." Her body was recovered from Hotel Montana rubble 33 days after the earthquake, and today the Gengels plan to raise 66 orphans—33 boys and 33 girls—as their own in the Western Hemisphere's poorest nation.

A communications major still pondering her future, Brit was strongly affected by her brief time in Haiti with 13 fellow Lynn students, her dad says. She shared the joy with her parents by phone, email and in one profound text three hours before the quake: "They love us so much.... They are so appreciative. I want to move here and start an orphanage."

Gripped by sorrow, Cherylann and Len pushed ahead with their daughter's dream. Len, a homebuilder for 30 years, would guide construction. Cherylann, a former restaurant owner, established a board of trusted friends and appropriate experts, and she launched the BLB (Be Like Brit) Foundation. Then the fundraising began.

By June 2010, the couple had raised \$250,000 for a building site in Grand Goâve, about two hours from the

Port au Prince airport. The high land with ocean views is now occupied by BLB's 19,000-square-foot facility.

Donors had given Be Like Brit \$1.4 million as of April 2013. The Gengels contributed \$600,000—cashing in a 401(k) and selling real estate investments—to complete the \$2 million balance required to build, staff and supply the orphanage. "We received no grant money or federal funding. This was all grassroots," Len says. The Gengels are committed to making the orphanage financially sustainable to avoid burdening their sons. They need about \$500,000 a year to cover operating expenses.

To get the orphanage up and running, the couple faced many challenges just from working in Haiti. Security measures always must be in place (State Department warnings detail kidnappings and killings there) and, even more daunting to Len, is "that you have to bring everything in." Finding a company to supply steel reinforcement bars and cement for concrete in the Dominican Republic, the nation sharing the Caribbean island with Haiti, was a huge victory.

Len is very grateful for in-kind donations to the project, too. Kohler contributed all sinks, toilets and plumbing. Also donated were electrical wiring and fixtures as well as a minivan-size 60,000-kilowatt generator. Structural engineers vital to earthquake-proof construction came pro bono from Boston-based firm Simpson Gumpertz & Heger. (The building is designed for 60 solar panels and still needs those.)

Len, who retired from his homebuilding career, says, "We are dedicating our lives to Haiti. I'm there twice a month and Cherylann, once a month.... This is our daughter's legacy. We are an integral part of daily operations." Even when stateside, both are Skyping and "working seven days a week for BLB," Cherylann says.

### Christina

### Boyle Cush

This is Cush's third article for *SUCCESS*. Her first (October 2012) featured the owners of Georgetown Cupcake, who star in TLC's *DC Cupcakes*. In November she profiled Jermaine Paul, winner of *The Voice*.



Britney Gengel (center) wanted to do her life's work in Haiti.

## How to Help

**BUY THE BOOK:**

Proceeds from *Heartache and Hope in Haiti: The Britney Gengel Story* (TriMark Press, \$19.95) will go toward a \$5 million endowment for Be Like Brit. Details: [HeartacheAndHopeInHaiti.com](http://HeartacheAndHopeInHaiti.com).

**SPONSOR A CHILD:**

One of the many donation options at [BeLikeBrit.org](http://BeLikeBrit.org) lets you provide a month of meals to a child for \$150. There's also information for those interested in traveling to Haiti to pitch in.

## The Doctor is **IN** ◀

Lacking clean water and sanitation, Haitians suffer from malaria, tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS. Len Gengel was proactive about health care at the Be Like Brit orphanage, incorporating a 1,150-square-foot medical clinic. Disaster medical expert Gregory R. Ciottone, M.D., assistant professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School, and his wife, Amalia, a registered nurse, are BLB's medical directors.

Dr. Ciottone uses telemedicine to treat BLB kids long-distance. "We have the bandwidth to bring First World medicine into Haiti," he says. The BLB clinic staff handles most care, but Ciottone can take full medical histories and do physicals on the computer when an unusual need arises. Major emergencies are stabilized at BLB, and a nearby hospital does follow-up care.

BLB board guidelines and child-care experts help choose the children. It's difficult to know which kids are true orphans and which ones have parents trying to give them up for a better life; few Haitian children have birth certificates. "They'll start here at 3 and stay with us forever," Len says. "This is their home. We are raising them. These are our kids."

Last spring, BLB had 28 children, more than half from the ranks of

the estimated 300,000 to 500,000 earthquake orphans; it should be full by year's end. "We hope to raise the future leaders of Haiti," Len says. The kids attend school down the street in an earthquake-proof building that is not part of BLB. When the kids are at BLB, a 37-page protocol covers guiding principles for raising them and keeping Brit's spirit alive.

Their young charges aren't accustomed to BLB's standard of living.

Cherylann says most had never used a toilet or eaten three meals a day. The BLB kids speak Creole but will learn English. This will empower them in a nation with a 70 percent unemployment rate, says Len, adding that "there's a big demand for interpreters." At BLB, they'll be exposed to sports, computers and health basics.

The Gengels say that working on the orphanage has given them more than they put into it. Len explains, "Losing a child is the most unnatural act. Your world is turned upside down."

The passage of time, much of it devoted to BLB, has helped, says Cherylann, adding that "the grief never really goes away. Three years later, we still wake up and our daughter is still not here." But a beautiful building with her name on it is now a force for good in a place where it's desperately needed. "Len was able to put his grief into building something tangible for Brit."

He sums up their feelings: "It's kept us sane. We say BLB was built out of grief, heartache, pain, love and compassion. We felt compassion from the world, and it was beautiful. It really made a difference." **S**