

Group marks anniversary of earthquake in Haiti

By Alexandra Davis

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A major snowstorm didn't stop a number of Frederictonians from commemorating the one-year anniversary of the earthquake in Haiti.

A group of about 40 people gathered at the Smythe Street Cathedral on Wednesday night for an event organized by FreddyLink. It included Caribbean food and music and a moment of silence to remember the devastation caused by the earthquake Jan. 12, 2010.

It was also an opportunity for people to learn more about the project FreddyLink is working on. The local organization is working with World Vision to connect Fredericton with a Haitian community called Cobocol. The goal is to help families in that region break the cycle of poverty and become self-sufficient over 15 years.

Project co-ordinator Bernie Zearth and Heidi Billington, both members of FreddyLink, set out to begin this initiative one year ago. They arrived in Port-au-Prince a few hours before the earthquake struck.

While World Vision was able to help them evacuate safely within 48 hours, Zearth said it was overwhelming to witness the immediate effects of the earthquake.

"It was so much devastation and it all happened in less than a minute," he said. "The city was basically destroyed. So many people were hurt, and most of the buildings were concrete and they weren't enforced well, so they just collapsed.

"A lot of them had collapsed on people, and there were a lot of people with lacerations or broken bones. The medical system was damaged as well, so there was no care available for all these people who were injured."

Zearth said that although the FreddyLink project didn't start off as he would have hoped, he's excited to return to Haiti with Billington on Feb. 22 for a week-long trip to finally see Cobocol firsthand.

He said people in Fredericton who are interested in getting involved can sponsor a child. So far, he said, enough donations have come in to sponsor 60 children.

He said the area is in desperate need of outside assistance.

"This area is really the poorest of the poor," he said. "It's a rural area, and World Vision has explained to me that in many cases a family has to decide who gets to eat because they just don't have enough food."

Billington said it's been inspiring to see many people get involved in FreddyLink.

"We definitely had a different kickoff to FreddyLink 's birth than we had anticipated due to the earthquake," she said "But it's been fantastic to see people get on board with sponsoring children."

She said she was also impressed by the number of people who attended the event to remember the earthquake in Haiti.

"I'm really impressed, considering the weather," she said. "With New Brunswickers, often when the snow falls it's our opportunity to cuddle up at home, so I think it's impressive to see so many people."

Zearth said FreddyLink will plan another event soon after the upcoming trip to Cobocol to inform the public of how things are going and what's going to happen next.

"We'll talk about what we saw there," he said. "We're going to be talking about a lot of different programs, like an agricultural

program, water, health, education, and we'll be able to show people what's going on."

For more information about FreddyLink or to sponsor a child, visit www.freddylink.com.