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Oberlin farm owner returns from Haiti



Filed by **Alicia Castelli** January 25th, 2010 in **Top Stories**.

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OBERLIN — The co-owner of Green Circle Growers returned from Haiti on Thursday, shocked at the devastation yet inspired by America's rush to help the victims of the Jan. 12 earthquake.



John Van Wingerden, five of his brothers and a nephew arrived Jan. 13 at their 200-acre Haitian farm, which is about nine miles east of Port au Prince.

"People were frozen," he said. "They were just in shock. As that shock wears off, I hope we, as Americans, do not forget their needs — don't forget we have such an abundance and forget about our neighbors in need."

Van Wingerden's family owns and runs the Green Circle nursery, as well as five agricultural projects throughout the world dedicated to Christian principles. The projects aim to teach people in Third World countries how to grow, market and sell their own food. His father, businessman Aart Van Wingerden, started the nonprofit Operation Double Harvest in Haiti in 1981.

Van Wingerden

The hotel Van Wingerden usually stayed at in Port-au-Prince had collapsed, killing 180 people. Four Double Harvest employees were killed, and he saw families desperately searching for food and water after going two or three days without.

As many as 700 patients in one day came through the farm's clinic. Fifty volunteer doctors worked there around the clock.

"The amputations were the hardest," he said. "After four or so days, that's the only option that was left. The good news is we saved their life. The bad news is, they lost a limb. ... Losing a limb in Haiti is virtually a guarantee of poverty in a country with 60 to 68 percent unemployment. ... I think there's going to be an entire generation of people in Haiti without limbs."

Van Wingerden said he made trips to the Dominican Republic for fuel, food and medicine.

Initially, the biggest obstacle was getting their hands on fuel to keep their farm operations going. The farm includes a tilapia fishery, a freshwater well, 150 acres of crops, greenhouses, chickens, the clinic, a school, a home-building project, a new hybrid agricultural project and trees for re-forestation.

The school was converted into a post-operative recovery area for clinic patients.

Once they got permission to be on the tarmac at the airport in Port-au-Prince to get the fuel they needed, Van Wingerden said he was proud to see 60 percent of the flights landing were from America.

"A person can make a difference, and we did for the people within our reach," Van Wingerden said.

"I'm thankful for my American compatriots from every walk of life who came to help. The thankfulness of the Haitians was overwhelming," he added. "... We are truly blessed as a nation. We're not lucky. We're blessed. There's a responsibility to being blessed."

Van Wingerden said the first days were spent getting the usual 700 meals a day up and running again for the communities near the farm.

"They live literally day-to-day in Haiti," Van Wingerden said. "There is no food on the shelf or in the fridge. The minute what little infrastructure is there is gone, it's total chaos. Desperation for food or water comes quickly."

The farm and its buildings were undamaged by the quake except for some cosmetic issues, Van Wingerden said.

Two other local businesses have already offered to help and are planning trips to Haiti for the rebuilding phase.

Kim Mulder, president of Starbuilders in South Amherst, said his company was in Haiti last March building a 40-foot by 60-foot produce cooler at Double Harvest. Two more trips were planned for this spring to finish that project.

"With the priorities of things in Haiti right now, first and foremost is obviously anything to do with health care, and then food is the second priority, and then housing for those folks who lost their homes," Mulder said, adding that Starbuilders plans to help with the rebuilding.

"Once all the medical crews have done everything they can, I'm sure I'll be talking with John about going down there and having our crews work with them in rebuilding housing. I'm looking forward to going back. It gets in your blood. It's a great experience."

Trio Concrete Construction of Avon also plans to help with the rebuilding, Van Wingerden said.

"We need to think about how to help them rebuild their lives so it meets the standards to withstand catastrophe and to make things better for their future," Van Wingerden said. "I hope the rebuilt Haiti will be different from the one two weeks ago."

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