

A Country in Crisis

Despite closed borders and widespread gang violence, Edward “Ted” Higgins, Jr., MD ’78, remains committed to offering hope through health care to the people of Haiti.

2023
Award Winner

In late August, Edward “Ted” Higgins, Jr., MD ’78, made his most recent quarterly trip to the Higgins Brothers SurgiCenter in Fonds-Parisien, Haiti. As he’s had to do for the past three years, he flew to Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, and drove six hours through the border at Malpasse to reach the medical center’s location seven miles away in Eastern Haiti. Travel from Port-au-Prince, little more than an hour drive, would be too perilous, the road controlled by gangs.

“We’ve had a container of supplies hijacked, a fuel truck commandeered for ransom, medical staff kidnapped for ransom, and our chief surgeon shot, all in separate incidents,” explains Higgins of his alternate route.

Not a week after returning home to Kansas City, Kansas, the border between the two countries was closed by the Dominican Republic government. The closure, in response to a dispute over canal irrigation on the Haitian side to divert water from a river that straddles both countries, has cut off the Higgins Brothers SurgiCenter from the only safe route to receive medicines and medical supplies, food, and construction equipment, as well as a third of its patients.

“It’s a humanitarian crisis,” says Higgins. “We are performing only emergency operations to salvage what anesthesia medications we have left. These are not easy decisions to make, and soon we will need to close down our operating rooms entirely simply from lack of obtainable medications for surgery. But we are not alone. All medical facilities in Haiti have curtailed medical services because of transportation issues created by the gangs. Several have lost key personnel to the Canadian and U.S. amnesty programs, thus closing surgery for patients.”

The Higgins Brothers SurgiCenter for Hope, named after Higgins’ father and uncle, was founded by Higgins in 2016 and has tripled in size in the years since. The facility currently has two full-sized operating rooms and provides the only 24-hour emergency room and trauma facility in the region. The 73-member staff includes 10 surgeons and anesthesiologists who treat an average of 1,300 patients a month, from a variety of surgical procedures to providing routine care, including pediatrics, medical, maternity and obstetrics, HIV, and dental care.

But all of that is currently in jeopardy.

“It is not right to hold the Haitian people hostage,” says Higgins. “This border closure needs resolution quickly otherwise more Haitians will die from starvation and lack of medical supplies. The resilience and resolve of the Haitian people are remarkable, but we are all human.”

It was during Higgins’ fourth year of surgical residency at Yale-New Haven Hospital that he and his wife, Kim, first experienced Haiti during a three-month rotation he did at Hôpital Albert Schweitzer in Deschapelles, Haiti. The Higgins were touched by the Haitian people, their culture, and their needs, and were inspired by the physicians who devoted their lives to transformative work in health care, local economies, and access to water.

After completing a vascular surgical fellowship at Baylor College of Medicine, Higgins and his wife settled in her hometown of Kansas City, where he helped start a busy general and vascular surgical practice.

Through his church, Higgins began annual trips to the Dominican Republic to provide



Left: Dr. Higgins receiving his Humanitarian Plaque, pictured with Medical Alumni Foundation President Larry Charlamb, MD '88, Norton College of Medicine Dean Lawrence Chin, MD, and Upstate President Mantosh Dewan, MD. Below, Higgins performing surgery in Haiti

health care to sugar cane cutters and their families. Seeing surgical needs of all kinds, he began operating in a borrowed clinic in 1992, training Dominican surgeons to perform both laparoscopic abdominal procedures as well as vascular access procedures for patients with end stage renal disease.

Higgins began medical mission trips to Haiti after a devastating earthquake in 2010. Because of the lack of surgical care in Haiti, patients travelled from afar when mission teams were present. During annual week-long trips to Fonds-Parisien over the next six years, he performed more than 500 surgeries. The obvious need for permanent surgical operating space and trained local surgeons to handle the demand motivated him to fund creation of the Higgins Brothers SurgiCenter for Hope.

“As individuals, we each need to have the



ability to hope. It is difficult to find hope in a country full of fear, danger, and poverty,” says Higgins. “We built the SurgiCenter and clinics to provide hope for care, a necessary tool for all of us.”

At the time, he chose the remote area due to its lack of medical resources. Little did he know how fortuitous that location would become—too remote to be bothered by gangs yet close to the Dominican Republic border.

For the first four years of the SurgiCenter’s existence, Higgins visited at least four times a year, bringing teams of medical volunteers—nurses, medical students and residents, and other surgeons who would perform complex procedures while training the local surgeons in their techniques.

“The goal was not only to provide the Haitian people with health care, but to

build a surgery program for Haitian doctors, bringing American surgeons down to help train them,” says Higgins. “The most exciting thing about the plan was always to have Haitian people running the surgery center. We’re there to offer support, to perhaps show them a procedure they haven’t seen yet. But the goal was to work ourselves out of a job.”

In 2020, Higgins retired from his own surgical practice to focus on training the local surgeons in vascular surgery.

“I was on the phone with Dr. Paul Farmer, who ran Partners in Health, and he said, ‘You know, Ted, when you’re down in Haiti, you’re the only vascular surgeon in the whole country,’” Higgins recalls. “I decided my partners here could do without me and I would spend more time focusing on training the surgeons down there.”

But it wasn’t that simple. First there was COVID-19. Then, in

August, a massive earthquake shook the southern peninsula of Haiti, creating huge destruction and causing more than 3,000 deaths. Higgins joined a team from his SurgiCenter to provide care for earthquake victims, traveling over the mountains on a “goat road” to avoid gangs that had begun controlling the main roads.

The following July, Haitian President Jovenel Moïse was assassinated, plunging the country into a political upheaval that has only increased widespread gang violence. “There is no functioning government or national army,” says Higgins, who stopped bringing medical mission teams with him due to the risk and also suspended a teaching program with the State University of Haiti Hospital in Port-au-Prince. He began traveling through the Dominican Republic, bringing whatever supplies he could carry in 50-lb duffel bags.

“We haven’t been able to send a supply container in two years. The gangs have taken over the ports. They’ve taken over the gas supply. They’ve got roadblocks on any major roads,” he says.

But while other medical facilities were forced

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Construction of the maternity center will be complete this year.





The Higgins family, left to right: wife Kim; daughter Helen; granddaughter Molly; daughter Becca; Higgins; daughter Maggie, MD; granddaughter Poppy, Dr. Jack Shuler (husband of Maggie); son Eddie and his wife Westy; and granddaughter Sophie

to close because they couldn't get supplies, the Higgins SurgiCenter benefitted from its location. "We could get what we needed through the Dominican Republic," says Higgins.

Accepting that the gang problem was not going to be resolved any time soon, Higgins had solar panels installed on the medical facilities—panels brought from the Dominican Republic—to eliminate the need for fuel. He also funded construction of a staff residence facility adjacent to the SurgiCenter, which will alleviate the need for staff members to travel gang territory to come to work. Because it is too dangerous to travel home, the construction workers live on site and work seven days a week.

"We have started moving people into the facility despite having no power, as the generator mechanic cannot travel to us because the gangs have blocked the road," he says.

Eventually, 22 employees will be able to live in the facility, which includes a community kitchen on each floor, as well as a kitchenette and bathroom in each unit.

A two-story maternity center is also under construction and on schedule to open in December.

"Our Haitian medical team and construction crews continue to work despite the harrowing conditions they live with," says Higgins. "Their determination and resilience continue to shine forth."

Of course, the same could be said about Higgins, who was on campus at the Norton College of Medicine on October 13 to accept the 2023 Humanitarian Award from the Upstate Medical Alumni Foundation during Reunion Weekend.

For the previous month, he'd been working nonstop to bring awareness to the dire situation in Haiti to help resolve the border issue.

"As a member of Haiti Health Network (HHN), a group of over 200 health care facilities in Haiti, we have been communicating closely with UN Security Council Haiti Humanitarian Ambassador William O'Neill, who understands the necessity of an open border, particularly at this time of limited travel in Haiti due to gangs," says Higgins. "Our goal has always been to stabilize the country and open up travel so medical care can be provided. We are hoping there will be some form of mediation between the Dominican Republic and Haiti to at least open the border and restore the economies for both countries."

Because of mixed messaging, the HHN conducted a poll of 1,500 Haitians living in Haiti regarding their opinion of intervention and leadership.

"Most Haitians favor international force involvement to help stabilize the country," says Higgins. "A large majority do not feel that Haiti alone can accomplish this without outside help. There is also not much confidence in Prime Minister Ariel Henry, or a consortium of business and civic leaders, the Montana Accord Group."

Even with that hope, other challenges remain. Higgins says more than 90 percent of physicians trained in Haiti leave the country to practice. That number has grown with the instability of the country over the last few years, with increasing numbers of Haitian professionals sponsored to the United States or Canada by relatives.

That is why Higgins feels so indebted to his SurgiCenter staff. "These are people that, to get to work, have been robbed, have been kidnapped, have been injured. They basically can't travel to see their families in town in Port-au-Prince because the roads are blocked. And you know what they do every day? They run that facility 24-7," he says. "They are absolute heroes."

While the current challenge is his greatest yet, Higgins says Haiti has always been a very difficult country to work within. "You face a brick wall everywhere you turn, with naysayers telling you, 'you can't do that,'" says Higgins. "Well, you figure out a way to do things. I don't feel deterred at all."

For more on the Higgins Brothers SurgiCenter, please see the Autumn 2019 Upstate Medical Alumni Journal or visit Higginsbrotherssurgicenter.org.