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A voice for a stranger

“I’m here to help,” she says in Creole to a family from Haiti. And she does.

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SANFORD

It was still dark Friday morning when Stephena Pierre left her Land O’Lakes home. For three hours she steered along the highway through slanting rain. Toward the airport. She wasn’t sure what to expect. She just wanted to give some scared, stranded stranger a voice. “Imagine losing your home, your family, your country, coming into a foreign land and not knowing the language,” Pierre said. “You need everything, but you don’t even know how to ask.”

The e-mail had come on Tuesday, while Pierre was at work: Translators needed. Does anyone speak Creole?

Thousands of people who had survived last week’s earthquake were starting to fly from Haiti into the Sanford-Orlando airport. Relief agencies needed volunteers to interpret, to help the displaced people get help.

Pierre, 35, is the director of Support Services for Eckerd Youth Alternatives. She does background screenings for potential foster parents and coordinates children’s records to ready them for adoption.

She was born in Haiti, but her mother fled with her and her six siblings when Pierre was still a baby. Last week, she lost countless relatives, friends, old neighbors — limbs and lives crushed beneath the rubble.

“They could have been me,” said Pierre, who still speaks Creole to her family. “Or it could have been my two boys.”

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Terminal B had been turned into a makeshift Walmart. Only here, everything was free: bottled water, Skittles and pretzels, diapers and donated clothes.

“The idea,” a trainer told Pierre, “is to just take care of the people and get them where they want to be. Most of them have



WILLIE J. ALLEN JR. | Times

Stephena Pierre offers crackers to Elizabeth, 5, and toddler Engist, who just arrived from Haiti with mom Camita Jerome.

family somewhere in the U.S.”

About 100 people are coming in on this plane, Pierre heard. More than 5,000 had arrived since Saturday. Friday’s passengers were mostly children who had been orphaned before the earthquake, who were in the process of being adopted in America. And American citizens who had been living in Haiti, people with dual citizenship or a current visa. Or children who had been born in the United States.

Most hadn’t slept or eaten in days.

“The people who have been coming in here, I’ve never seen such exhaustion,” an official told the trainers. “You have to be ready for this: Some of them are just comatose.”

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They shuffled through the double doors

silently, toting babies and backpacks, bulging suitcases filled with what was left of their lives.

A 20-something man in a black suit and shiny shoes; a teenage girl in a denim skirt, with a silk flower laced through her dark hair; a 2-year-old boy sporting a white linen suit.

When you’re limited to the clothes on your back, you might as well wear the best. “English?” a volunteer asked each person as they got off the plane. The first few families spoke English.

Then a woman in a brown dress, about Pierre’s age, slowly lumbered up the tunnel. She was carrying a toddler and diaper bag. A duffel, bigger than her baby, was strapped across her back. Three girls, ages 5 to 11, kept close behind. “English?”

The mother shook her head no.

So Pierre stepped forward and offered her hand. "I'm Stephena," she said, in Creole. "I'm here to help."

The woman's eyes got wide. Here, finally, was someone she could talk to. She clasped Pierre's hand.

"Merci," she said softly. "Merci," she said again. "I'm Camita Jerome."

Gatorade and lollipops. Shampoo and toothpaste. Coloring books for the girls. Pierre filled bags with supplies for the family. She helped Jerome fill out forms, find Pull-Ups for her son, who kept coughing. "Is he sick?" Pierre asked.

Jerome stroked her son's head. "Only since the earth shook."

For 11 days, ever since their house toppled around them, Jerome and her children had been sleeping in the street. At night, she said, it got cold. She tried to wrap her baby in blankets. But he just kept kicking them off.

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When she got to her sister's house in Miami, Jerome promised, she would take her son to see a doctor. There just hadn't been any way in Haiti. So many people were so much worse off.

Jerome's sister had invited her and her children to move in with them, for a while. But she had to find a way to get from Sanford to Miami. Her sister couldn't come get them.

At first, Pierre thought they would have

to ride the bus. Then someone suggested a Mercy Flight. Volunteer pilots who owned small planes were flying people who had left Haiti to reconnect with relatives.

While they waited for word about a free flight, Jerome's daughters played cards on the carpet. Her toddler pushed the luggage cart. And Pierre quietly drew out her story, the story that could have been hers:

*"The people who
have been coming in
here, I've never seen
such exhaustion.
... Some of them are
just comatose."*

The girls had just gotten home from school. She was drawing a bath for the youngest. The boy was playing inside and the others were in the yard. She felt the floor shake, and at first thought nothing of it. When the walls started trembling, she scooped up her son and raced into the yard.

Her husband was driving home from the school where he teaches when the road opened before him. Jerome's mother was buried beneath a wall, then recovered. Her husband stayed behind in Haiti to help take care of her. And their flattened home. "He

worries about looters," she told Pierre. As if there were anything left to steal.

In the ruins of their house, she found the children's passports and shot records. Because the youngest three had been born in the United States, and Jerome had a current visa, they could all travel to Florida.

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Jerome talked on, in brief sentences, stopping often to look down or watch her kids. She had seen all the children who lived across the street crushed inside their home.

At night, she told Pierre, she would spread sheets in the dark street and spend hours rocking each of her four children to sleep.

"You'll have to give me a minute," said Pierre, as she was interpreting. "All these people have been through ..."

Two hours later, a man with a clipboard approached. A private plane was coming for Jerome and her children. They would be in Miami before dark.

"Merci," Jerome cried when Pierre told her the news.

Pierre reached her arm around the exhausted mother. Jerome dropped her head on the interpreter's shoulder. Then she sat up and wiped her eyes and said something softly.

"She doesn't want the children to see her crying," Pierre explained. She didn't think they would understand that these tears were not for sorrow. They were tears of hope.