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Franklin native, home from work in Haiti, fears recovery after quake will be difficult

By *MARY ANN BOURBEAU*
STAFF WRITER

Dr. Catherine Wolf knows firsthand how difficult it will be for Haiti to recover from Tuesday's devastating earthquake.

She has been living on the island on and off since 1981, working as a doctor and a full-time missionary in an isolated mountainous region near Jeremie, about 120 miles west of Port au Prince, where the quake was centered.

"This is devastating to a country like this," Wolf said. "Haiti functions poorly at best. This is an incredible blow."

Wolf, who was raised in Franklin, was in New Jersey when the earthquake struck. She came back to the United States on Dec. 19 to visit family for the holidays and do some fundraising for the nonprofit organization she founded, the Wisconsin-based Friends for Health in Haiti. She was due to return to Haiti next week. On Wednesday, she flew to Florida in the hopes of getting a flight to Port au Prince and catching a smaller plane to Jeremie.

"If I get back to Port au Prince, I still may not be able to get back to our town," she said. "As far as I know, our area hasn't been affected. But I haven't had any direct communication with anybody there. Cell phone calls are not going through. If I can't get to Jeremie, I'll contact some relief organizations and I'll work with them in Port au Prince."

Wolf's roommate in Jeremie, a Haitian nurse named Cherie Severe with whom she runs a small clinic for the mountain residents, also was in the U.S. when the earthquake struck. The two have been trying to contact Severe's two brothers who live in the capital city, but have not heard from them yet.

"I heard from one of the young men that we work with," said Wolf. "He told me he was driving in Port au Prince. He said his car was picked up and transported across the street. The buildings are down and there's no electricity. The infrastructure there is poor at best. I'm sure the government is going to be totally at a loss of knowing what to do and how to do it."

Wolf, 57, is also worried about a friend in Port au Prince who lives in a home that has electricity and internet access.

"I e-mailed her, but I haven't heard back yet," she said.

She fears that the relief efforts will take a very long time because the roads are so rocky and difficult to navigate.

"I'm sure thousands of lives will be lost, not to mention homes and livelihoods," she said. "I don't know how the rescue operations are going to work. I'm sure the streets are totally blocked. This is horrible, just when the country was beginning to stabilize in terms of security and the political situation. I fear there will be total chaos and anarchy and a lot of looting."