

The Malibu Times

Friday, February 16, 2007

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One Love for Jamaica

Wednesday, July 21, 2004

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Jill McKenzie Burr and her husband, James, have made it their life mission to help the less fortunate in Jamaica. McKenzie Burr has been helping others since her mother told her it was the right thing to do when she was a child.

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By Yayoi Lena Winfrey/Special to The Malibu Times

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Her eyes brim with tears as Jill McKenzie Burr recounts the events of May 18 in Port Maria, Jamaica. When she and her husband, James Burr, approached the northern coastal village by car, they spotted a noisy crowd pointing toward the water. While the Burr's vehicle slowed, a friend riding along shouted out the window for an explanation. The answer came from a local, "One boatload of Haitians."



Jill McKenzie Burr holds a frightened Haitian boy who has just arrived on the Jamaican shore. On May 18 she and her husband, James Burr, helped a boatload of refugees who arrived in Jamaica. Photo by James Burr

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Pulling off the road, the Burr party noticed two small boats bobbing in the choppy sea. One belonging to a Jamaican fisherman attempting to pull the Haitians into it from the second.

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The Burrs then drove to another part of the village where the fisherman was headed with the refugees. Like the Jamaicans surrounding them, they immediately began helping as the first boatload, which contained children, reached the shore. As James Burr began snapping photos, his wife gently coaxed a frightened, parentless boy from the boat. Because she sensed he spoke no English, McKenzie Burr encouraged him with her eyes. Soon, she was holding the crying child in her arms.

"I've never experienced anything like that before," she said, overcome with emotion.

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As the children were put on a bus headed for a hospital, McKenzie Burr heard Jamaicans murmuring thanks for having been the rescuers and not the victims. Moved by their generosity, she noted that many were, themselves, impoverished.

"We think we have problems," McKenzie Burr said. "We don't know problems."

Although the Burrs visited the refugee center later, they were unable to locate the boy Jill had pulled from the boat.

"He was not in good shape," James Burr said.

Many of the refugees were dehydrated and suffering from exposure. Because of recent political unrest and a devastating flood that claimed more than 2,000 lives, Haitians are barely surviving in their country, which is located 93 miles from Jamaica. Besides the lack of food, there is little sanitation, which often leads to disease. Over the past several months, more than 500 desperate Haitians have left their homeland by cramming into dilapidated fishing boats.

Since 1804, after Haitians led by Toussaint L'Overture overthrew Napoleon's armies in the first successful slave revolt of the Western World, Haiti has suffered from the repercussions of self-rule. Slapped with an embargo by the United States and other countries that refused to recognize the island nation or to trade with it, Haiti slowly deteriorated. Fear that American slaves would follow the Haitians' example kept its people isolated, dependent on a struggling economy for sustenance. Today, deforestation has rendered the land vulnerable, leaving it open to devastating floods.

Although the Burrs live in Malibu, where James Burr is a nutritionist, they've also resided part time in Jamaica for 10 years, developing the Jamaica Community Ecological Learning Center, a nonprofit organization that encourages sustainable ecotourism and natural healing. For a decade, they've sponsored Jamaican school children. Recently, a home and 16 acres were donated by a Kingston attorney, making it possible for them to establish the center, where training and education toward eradicating improper wastewater management and establishing recycling programs will be offered.

"It's been our life's mission," McKenzie Burr said.

Raised in Atlanta, McKenzie Burr said she remembers her mother encouraging her to give gifts to the poor in lieu of requesting Christmas presents for herself. She became a vegetarian at 25, because, she said, "I love animals." As a college student, she marched for civil rights, following the teachings of Martin Luther King Jr. and Hosea Williams. The reggae music of Bob Marley led McKenzie Burr to visit Jamaica repeatedly and when she met her husband to be, she told him, "If you want to hang out with me, you have to go to Jamaica because I'm

moving there."

With Malibu architect Eric Lloyd Wright, grandson of Frank Lloyd Wright, the Burrs are building Bamboo Eco Resort & Spa on 209 acres of land, using organic architecture and bamboo for materials. The resort will be powered by renewable solar, wind and hydroelectric energy while water will be procured from underground springs. Locally grown organic foods will be served and nontoxic housekeeping products and organic bedding and towels will be used. Interiors will be decorated with native arts and crafts. Employees will be hired from the community and given the opportunity to own a piece of the resort.

"The [Jamaican] people teach us the 'one love' experience," said McKenzie Burr, referring to Bob Marley's hit song. It's a song the Burrs live by.

The Jamaica Community Ecological Learning Center is a project of International Humanities 501(c)3 nonprofit organization. For more information, call 589.8534 or send an e-mail to jill@bambooecoresort.com. You can also visit the Web site, www.ihc.com.

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