

# “Going Out To Face The Giant”

## Haiti Mission One of Many for Surgeon Mac Baxter

By SHARON H. FITZGERALD

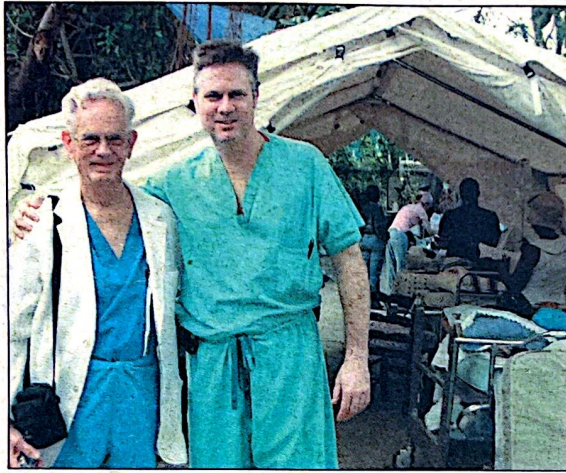
After watching his family-practitioner father care for the residents of tiny Hernando, Miss., for 40 years, Malcom E. “Mac” Baxter decided healing was in his blood. That’s probably never been more evident than when Baxter and his surgical assistant Rick Hayes boarded a small plane in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., on Jan. 20 and landed later that day on the 3,300-foot airstrip in Jacmel, Haiti, which was devastated by an earthquake nine days earlier.

Baxter is an orthopaedic surgeon and a founding partner of Nashville-based Premier Orthopaedics and Sports Medicine, with several locations in Middle Tennessee.

Mission trips are nothing new to Baxter: He’s been to Romania, Kenya, South Africa, Peru and the Ukraine, where his younger brother, David, is a full-time missionary. Yet, the purpose of those missions was to improve people’s quality of life. “Looking back on it, this trip to Haiti didn’t improve their lives; it saved a lot of lives,” Baxter said.

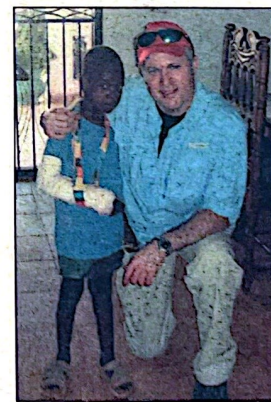
It was just last Thanksgiving when Baxter returned from his second mission trip to Peru, where he delivered arthroscopic equipment and taught physicians there how to use it. That’s why, when the first images of the ruin in Haiti crossed his television screen, he hesitated. “I was sitting there thinking somebody else will do it, and I was thinking of all the reason not to do it,” he recalled. “Yet, I really felt God telling me, ‘You need to do it.’”

And that’s what he did. “I sum it up as going out to face the giant, not to run from the giant,” Baxter said. His Brentwood church, Fellowship Bible Church, helps sponsor an orphanage in Jacmel, on the southernmost part of the island about 40 miles from Port-au-Prince. Orphanage officials called the church, pleading for help. “All the aid was going into Port-au-Prince, and none of these smaller cities were getting any aid, and they felt forgotten,” Baxter said. With the help of Brentwood-based Hope Force International, a disaster-relief agency, the church raised funds and collected supplies for Baxter’s journey. The surgeon also called on Southern Hills Medical Center, where he performs much of his more complicated surgical procedures. The hospital donated orthopaedic surgical supplies, such as plates and screws, a battery-powered drill, antibiotics and other medications. At the Southwest Airlines terminal in Nashville, Baxter’s baggage was about 500 pounds overweight, and the airline waived all fees. In Florida, private pilots were donating their time and their aircraft to ferry relief workers to Haiti, and Baxter hitched a ride. His first night, Baxter got a taste of what the Haiti people had been



Dr. Mac Baxter poses with Dr. Brinson McGowan. A Florida orthopaedic surgeon, McGowan founded the clinic where Baxter worked for a week.

(below) A cast, colorful sling and hug do wonders for a broken arm.



through when a severe aftershock roiled the island. “It just literally shook the whole house, and I got up and slept in the van because it was such a violent shake,” he recollected.

Baxter was in for another shock, too. “It surprised me when I got there. I thought I would be working with other orthopaedic surgeons. Come to find out, I was the only one there,” he said. “When word got out that there was an orthopaedic surgeon doing surgery, the people came out of the woodwork. They just felt forgotten.”

Over the next six days, Baxter and Hayes performed 35 procedures and treated about 100 more patients with first aid and casts. They plated femurs and forearms, inserted external fixators for tibia fractures and performed three amputations. One amputee was an 11-year-old girl, septic with a high fever. “If we hadn’t

cut her leg off, as bad as that sounds, she would have died. She wouldn’t have made it through the night. She was that sick,” he said. “Had we not been there, she would have been one more person who would have perished because of the earthquake.”

Baxter said he performed surgery on patients who had lived a dozen days with snapped bones protruding through their skin. Yet, he was struck by their patience, gratitude and fortitude. “They sat around with these horrible fractures and didn’t complain. I didn’t hear a lot of crying or screaming,” Baxter said. “After nine days, they really didn’t expect anybody to come. That’s the thing that jumps out

the most, that they were so appreciative.” The surgeon and his assistant worked 14- to 16-hour days, and most patients waited two days outside the small clinic for help. Baxter treated patients in Cayes-Jacmel, a nearby village where the clinic had survived the earthquake unscathed.

“The good news is, the day I left, three orthopaedic surgeons came in behind me, so there was a good continuity of care there,” Baxter said, adding, “We prayed with every patient before we did surgery. I told them, ‘I left a wife, four kids and a nice place to live because God told me to come help you and share the love of Christ with y’all.’ It was just a touching moment.”

That wife is Chris, a Christian author and blogger, and the couple has four teenage children. Chris’ father, an orthopaedic surgeon who once practiced in Jackson, Miss., grew up in Hernando, close friends with Baxter’s father. After graduating from the University of Mississippi, Baxter headed to Jackson to pursue his medical degree at Ole Miss. His father suggested he look up his old friend, and that’s how Baxter met Chris, a championship swimmer at the University of Texas. “It was sort of an arranged marriage,” Baxter quipped. Baxter’s love of sports – he played high school football and baseball and is now an avid golfer – is one reason he chose an orthopaedic specialty. Today he specializes in arthroscopic work, particularly the scoping of shoulders and knees.

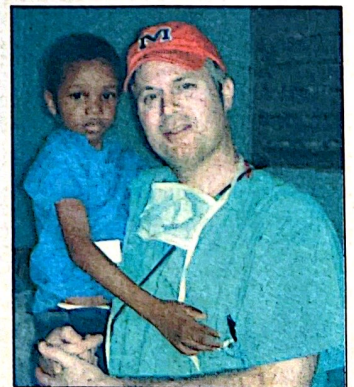
## Southern Hills Honors Extraordinary Community Service

Last month, Southern Hills Medical Center presented orthopaedic surgeon Malcom Baxter, MD, with the physician award as part of the annual Frist Humanitarian Awards, which are given to individuals whose service demonstrates extraordinary concern for the welfare of patients, co-workers and the community. In addition to Baxter, awards were presented to Marjorie Newcomb (volunteer) and supply chain technician Barbara Perry (employee).

“These individuals demonstrate a level of commitment and caring that goes beyond everyday acts of kindness and inspire us with their compassion, dedication and spirit,” said Southern Hills CEO Thomas Ozburn.

When news of the Haitian earthquake broke, Baxter immediately rearranged his schedule to fly down and care for those in need. In 2009, Dr. Baxter’s two mission trips to Peru so inspired him that he now serves as a mentor to young Latinos at El Shaddai Christian Church. On other mission trips to Haiti, Peru and Romania, he has taught new techniques to local surgeons and arranged for the donation of medical equipment. He has been a member of the Southern Hills medical staff since 1995.

Each year since 1971, HCA hospitals celebrate the humanitarian spirit by honoring physicians, employees and volunteers who exemplify care and compassion. The awards are named in honor of the late Thomas Frist Sr., MD.



Nashville orthopaedic surgeon Mac Baxter met some unforgettable children during his week in earthquake-torn Haiti. Here he holds one of them.