

IND alum's work in Haiti inspires family, friends

K.C. Bersch first visited Haiti in 1997, when she was a student at the Institute of Notre Dame in Baltimore. She accompanied her mother on a mission of mercy rooted in their family's long-distance support of a child there.

Seven years later and armed with a biology degree from the College of Charleston, Bersch took a position at Wings of Hope, an orphanage-like facility outside Port-au-Prince that cares for disabled Haitian children whose special needs range from autism to paralysis of all four limbs.

"I told K.C., nobody moves to Haiti," said Lani Bersch, her mother. "Six months later, there was no question in my mind that she had made the right decision. ... She feels she's in the center of what God wants her to do."

K.C., 29, is now the veteran director of education at Wings of Hope, which nurtures children whose lives were in the balance before the 7.0-magnitude earthquake struck Port-au-Prince Jan. 12.

"In Haiti," Bersch's mother said, "disabled children are throwaways."

Since her daughter (pictured on page 1) went to work in Haiti in 2004, Lani Bersch has made at least 11 trips to Wings of Hope, and will return to its facility in Fermath, possibly as soon as Jan. 24.

It's a family affair, as K.C.'s brother, Alec, 21, has withdrawn from the spring semester at Towson University to remain at Wings of Hope as a volunteer.

"He went there around Christmas, planning to spend the semester break," Lani Bersch said. "Alec was to come home Feb. 1, but he's decided to stay."

The inspiration of K.C. is not limited to her household in the northeast Baltimore community of Mayfield.

K.C. and Alec went to St. Francis of Assisi School. He is a graduate of Archbishop

Curley High School. The Henry brothers, Christopher and Patrick, followed the same educational path as Alec, and like him, they take outreach cues from K.C.

Christopher Henry, 21, spent four months at Wings of Hope in the fall of 2008, returned in September 2009 and was scheduled to return there Jan. 21. Patrick Henry, 19, left Baltimore Jan. 8 to assist at Wings of Hope and another outreach operated by the Hearts with Haiti foundation, the St. Joseph Home, an orphanage for boys in Port-au-Prince.

Four days after the earthquake, he got the last seat on a plane to Fort Lauderdale carrying Bill Nathan, the director of St. Joseph Home, who was injured in the earthquake. A surreal stretch peaked Jan. 17, when Patrick appeared on an ABC News segment on the rescue of Nathan.

"I went to college to study economics and political science," Patrick said. "This trip totally changed those plans. I'm going into nursing."

Patrick and Alec Bersch were working at St. Joseph Home the morning of Jan. 12, but had returned to Wings of Hope, about 10 miles to the south, when the earthquake hit.

"You couldn't sleep, because of the aftershocks," Patrick said. "You're asking yourself, 'Is this building going to come down?' Everyone was scared."

Why go to Haiti?

"The motto for St. Francis of Assisi School is 'It's not just a school, it's a way of life,' and it's more than a saying," said David Henry, the father of Patrick and Christopher. "The school has a lot to do with this."

So does K.C. Bersch.

"God," said her mother, Lani, "was telling her to do something. She heard that call."

A fundraiser for Wings of Hope and Catholic Relief Services will be held Jan. 24, from 3-8 p.m., at the Fado Irish Pub in Annapolis. For more information, call 443-928-7811.