

Haitian girl, 8, fitted for leg by Shriners in Phila.

By Michael Matza
Inquirer Staff Writer

Eight-year-old Sarah Maurice, who lost a leg to Haiti's earthquake, had just one question for doctors Wednesday at Shriners Hospital for Children in Philadelphia.

When the technicians finish building her artificial limb, will it be the color of her chocolate-brown skin?

Prosthetist Jennifer Stieber assured her it would.

Sarah, an irrepressible elf in a blue-striped dress and a single brown sandal, mostly laid her crutches aside to hop about the hospital on her sound left leg during a morning of medical evaluation.

Her spunk belied her tragic backstory: the collapse of her family home that killed her 44-year-old mother and left Sarah trapped with the corpse in the rubble for two days; the amputation of the child's leg above the knee; a stifling week in a tent on a Port-au-Prince street; the agonizing evacuation over broken roads to the undamaged house of a great-aunt in the southwestern town of Port Salut.

Having survived, Sarah now has a chance to thrive, thanks to a collaboration among Haitian musician Wyclef Jean's charitable Yele Foundation; the Global Medical Relief Fund of Staten Island, N.Y.; and Shriners, a network of 22 pediatric hospitals that treat eligible children free of charge.

Also evaluated and prepped Wednesday for prostheses at Shriners were Chantal Mori and Magarette Pierre, both 17, each missing an arm above the elbow.

Since the Jan. 12 earthquake, the Philadelphia hospital has taken in a total of seven Haitian children, five of them amputees. More could be on the way.

Elissa Montanti, a tireless former medical lab assistant and sometime lyricist, accompanied the girls to the hospital from her Staten Island home. She heads the Global Medical Relief Fund, a charity for children in disaster zones.

She got involved in international relief work in 1996, when she wrote a song, "Let's Do a Miracle," for a friend's charity that raised money for educational supplies for Bosnian children. That connection led to a meeting with then-U.S. Ambassador to Bosnia Muhamed Sacirby.

"He told me Bosnia needs more than pencil cases," Montanti said. "Then he reached into his drawer and handed me a letter."

It was dictated by then-12-year-old Kenan Malkic, who lost two arms and a leg after stepping on a land mine. It ended with three words: "Please help me."

Montanti got to work. She recruited a prosthetist, arranged for Malkic to come to America, and got an airline to provide complimentary travel. A month and a half later, he and his mother got off a plane at JFK Airport.

After four months of treatment, Malkic "went back with new arms, a new leg, and a new life," Montanti said.

In the decade since, the Global Medical Relief Fund, working with Shriners, has coordinated care for dozens of war-wounded children from Liberia and Iraq, as well as earthquake victims from El Salvador - and now Haiti. The cost of a basic prosthetic limb fabricated by Shriners can be as high as \$6,000, a hospital spokeswoman said.

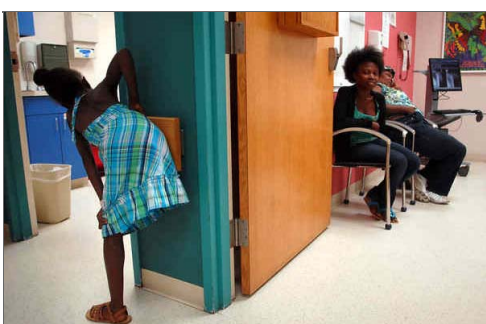
Within days of the Haiti quake, Montanti set off for the fractured country on a flight to the Dominican Republic. There, she met Mori and Pierre at a borderside hospital in Jimani and knew immediately she wanted to help them.

Through a contact in Port-au-Prince who works with the children's charity No Time for Poverty, Sarah Maurice's case came to light about the same time. In a nation rife with tragedy, her story stood out. Her father and other men freed her from her collapsed house, but had to leave her dead mother behind because of unstable debris. The body has not yet been retrieved.

The celebrity musician Jean, through his high-profile Yele Foundation, stepped up to provide round-trip airfares for the three girls and their chaperones and thousands of dollars in incidental expenses for clothing, toiletries, and supplies.

Montanti followed up with a blizzard of paperwork for the Haitian government and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

A couple of times, the momentum stalled because of document problems and miscommunications, Montanti said. On one of her trips to pick up the girls, she said, Haitian officials suddenly refused to



TOM GRALISH / Staff Photographer


At Shriners Hospital in Philadelphia, Sarah Maurice, 8, hops without a crutch as another Haitian girl, Chantal Mori, 17 (right), smiles at her.



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let them go despite an earlier assurance that they could leave.

She persevered by focusing on her goal - "to restore their dignity, to give them a sense of wholeness again, and the feeling they can lead almost normal, productive lives."

On Tuesday, during a shopping trip to Kmart in New York, Sarah bought a digital camera to collect visual "souvenirs" of her medical treatment and adventure in America. The camera has been practically welded to her hand since.

Prosthetists took a casting of her stump Wednesday from which they will make the socket that will attach her artificial leg to her body. She returned Wednesday night to Staten Island and will be back in Philadelphia next week for a fitting. A few weeks later, she'll get her permanent limb, followed by physical therapy and training in how to use it.

Under a government program called "humanitarian parole," she can stay in the United States for a year. But it could be just a month before she's back with her great-aunt in southwestern Haiti.

"We'll teach her to do a bicycle if she wants," prosthetist Joanne Kanas said. "It is not going to be as good as the leg she had. But she will be able to do a lot of things."