

# POSTCARDS FROM THE EDGE

Australian nurse, filmmaker and author Alison Thompson is consistently in the wrong place at the wrong time – and she wouldn't have it any other way. She talks about life as a volunteer and what Haiti is like one year on.



In 2001, Alison Thompson was helping to recover people from the rubble of the first 9/11 attack when the second plane hit the Twin Towers. In 2004, she flew to Sri Lanka within days of the country being devastated by a tsunami. So when an earthquake rocked Haiti in January last year, actor Sean Penn knew exactly who to call about joining him in a relief effort. He championed *The Third Wave*, Alison's 2007 documentary about aid workers, and they've been working together ever since – setting up NGOs and helping to ease Haiti's suffering following one of the worst natural disasters in recent history.

## TELL US A BIT ABOUT WHAT YOU'VE BEEN DOING IN HAITI.

A few days after the disaster struck Haiti, I flew there with Sean Penn and 10 doctors to see if we could help for a few weeks. We found ourselves in charge of a busy field hospital, which I ran for the first five months, and an IDP (internally displaced people) camp with over 65,000 people in it. Sean quickly became the camp manager and started an NGO called J/P Haitian Relief Organisation to help get donations to look after people. After leaving JPHRO, I co-founded We Advance with actress Maria Bello and lawyer Aleda Frishman. We build and open women's clinics around Port-au-Prince and help empower women to claim back their rights and lives. Our plan is to

bring all of Haiti's women's groups together to form a powerful union of women caring for women and protecting their human rights. Right now we have a new clinic in Cité Soleil, which I think is amongst the most dangerous and worst slums in the world, but I love it there and wouldn't want to be anywhere else.

## CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT SOME OF THE SUCCESSES YOU'VE SEEN IN HAITI?

The Haitian people have had plague after plague thrown at them, with earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, cholera, malaria, TB, diphtheria, corrupt elections – and the list goes on. But they still stand strong and they are very spiritual people. They have learned to live with next to nothing and in some of the worst conditions I have ever seen anywhere in this world. I see an 80-year-old woman looking after 60 orphans by herself under tarps. I see orphans living in the dirt with maggots and worms coming out of their ears, but who manage to survive with the help of older orphans looking after them. I see women with amputated legs and arms still looking after their six kids. We could learn so much from the strength of the Haitian people.



The success stories are the individual volunteers and the small charities and NGOs who are not stuck in red tape and bureaucracy, and who don't try to do too much but end up getting a hell of a lot done. Global D.I.R.T. is a great example and also Grassroots United.

**WHAT HAVE BEEN SOME OF THE FAILURES?**

The failures are the large, world-famous NGOs we all know who are holding onto the money and aid and who have become so large they are stuck in their own red tape and bureaucracy. It's really embarrassing and shameful. I don't need to name them. Think of the large ones you know and it is them.

**WHAT ARE SOME OF THE BASIC HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES YOU'VE SEEN?**

In Haiti, We Advance focuses on women's rights. Haitian women are violated on a daily basis. I see women who have been raped by 14 men the night before on their way to have a shower and who have had their tongue cut out so they can't talk about it. There is no justice here. Daily in our clinics I see two, three and four-year-old girls with syphilis and gonorrhoea, and it makes me cry into my cereal.

**THERE ARE OVER A MILLION PEOPLE STILL LIVING UNDER TARPS NEARLY A YEAR AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE. HOW CAN HAITI MOVE ON FROM THIS?**

I'm just a volunteer so I don't have all the answers, but the main thing Haiti needs are sustainable businesses and jobs so the NGOs don't have to play God and give out food and water every day. Right now, the houses need to be cleared by engineers so people can move back in or government land must be allocated for rebuilding. People are

still in miserable conditions, and a serious deadly outbreak can occur at any moment – as it has in the north with the cholera epidemic. Cholera is also in a small part of PAP (Port-au-Prince), but if it hits these camps with 60,000 plus people living in them under tarps in close quarters, we will have a major catastrophe like we've never seen before on our hands.

**WHY DO YOU THINK LESS THAN TEN PER CENT OF THE MONEY PROMISED TO HAITI HAS ARRIVED?**

It's the same thing that happens in all the large natural disasters. There are a million reasons why it never reaches there. Pledges are withdrawn, there is a lot of corruption and mistrust, even the simple fact that people who raised money then don't know where to send it. A lot of money sits in bank accounts for years accruing interest until the NGOs decide how they want to use it. They want to use it wisely, to be accountable to their donors.

Some NGOs have such a large overhead that most of the donations get spent on their own buildings, faxes, cars, air travel and \$500-a-night hotels, as I saw during the tsunami [in Sri Lanka]. It's shameful. Another reason is that pledging governments don't want to send in a lot of money just before elections as it will be used for election campaigns and not for the people in need. There are still another million reasons why it hasn't reached Haiti. I know the Australian Government sent in their pledged money to Haiti but the USA has not sent in their money yet. The aid business is a rough business to be in, and it is a business!

**PEOPLE HAVE SAID THAT THE JPHRO CAMP WAS BETTER EQUIPPED THAN MANY OF THE MAJOR INTERNATIONAL AID CAMPS.**

Yes, it was a successful and well-equipped camp because of plain old common sense and hard work. Everyone got their head down and worked very hard with no sleep and in very hard camping conditions. If they couldn't do something, they would go in another direction to get it done. It was the largest and most developed camp in Haiti and still is. NGOs don't work well together but Sean had them all working well together. If you didn't want to join in, then you had to go work somewhere else. Some people may not like him or his politics but in Haiti he has a pure heart and no agenda but to help the people. I watched him live in a tent for six months eating rice and beans and getting a few hours sleep each night. He is making a really huge difference while many others are still co-ordinating the co-ordination of the co-ordination meetings.

**HOW CAN THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY HELP HAITI?**

By encouraging business and sustainable businesses and by helping rebuild the education system with new schools and learning facilities. A huge international effort needs to be exerted into reforestation, which will have a large impact on the quality of human life by soaking up pollution, rebuilding natural habitats and ecosystems. Port-au-Prince is Haiti's largest city and its overpopulation and congestion plays a big part in many of its problems.

**ALMOST SIX YEARS ON, HAVE THE GOALS FOR SRI LANKA'S POST-TSUNAMI RECOVERY BEEN ACHIEVED?**

No, there is still much need for rebuilding and many people were lost in the cracks. I still run CTEC (Community Tsunami Early-Warning Centre) daily in Sri Lanka. It is the only tsunami warning centre in Sri Lanka keeping people safe by monitoring earthquakes 24 hours a day, but I may have to close it soon due to lack of funding.

A disaster gets help and stays "sexy" as long as it stays in the news. But usually after six months the media and the world has moved onto the next disaster. That is the way it is and there is much aid required for the ones left behind: the 2004 Tsunami, the Pakistan earthquakes and floods, Peru, Katrina... the list goes on.

**WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO PEOPLE CONSIDERING HEADING TO HAITI TO HELP?**

It will need volunteers and medical volunteers for the next 20 years, so never think you are too late. Go for two weeks. For most volunteers it will be the greatest and most real adventure in their life. Healing even a small infection helps save a leg from being amputated later on. People die of the smallest things in Haiti and your trip will save many lives. The cholera epidemic alone will be with us for quite a while. The best groups I have worked with are IMAT (International Medical Assistance Team) and CMAT (Canadian Medical Assistance Team). You can go to their websites to apply.

You can find out more about We Advance at [weadvance.org](http://weadvance.org) and J/P Haitian Relief Organisation at [jphro.org](http://jphro.org). Alison's book, *The Third Wave: A Volunteer's Story*, is due out in July this year.