

# Guests: Hearts Afire brings aid to Philippines

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Typhoon Haiyan, one of the most powerful storms ever recorded, had hit the Philippines. That is the news we woke up to Nov. 9. As word of the devastation trickled in, our hearts began to ache for the people of the Philippines and we remembered that long-term missionaries Jonathan and Sara Jennings, formerly of Bradenton, and their four young children are working there in the poorest and most-neediest communities.

Hearts Afire is no stranger to global calamities. But every time we get the call from long-term missionary friends stationed in these countries, it induces an immediate flight-and-fight response.

Founded in 2006, Sarasota-based Hearts Afire has worked in 12 developing countries -- along with in-country government and nongovernmental organizations and ministries -- to provide medical and spiritual support to the underserved, by taking American volunteers on short-term, humanitarian mission trips.

Since our response to the Haiti earthquake in January 2010, we have been on alert for any time that missionaries call with a cry for help.

On Nov. 9, we received this call from the Philippines and since then Hearts Afire has worked diligently with various major Philippine corporations and local businesses, helping to provide more than \$200,000 in aid -- including food, water, clothing, building materials and medical supplies -- to the storm-ravaged islands of Kinatarkan and northern Cebu.

Although these regions did not make headlines because the storm initially made landfall on the island of Leyte, they were still in the typhoon's direct path. There are more than 7,000 Philippine islands and 2,200 are inhabited. Several hundred were significantly affected. This emphasizes the immensity of the storm.

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Large relief organizations typically concentrate on the hardest-hit regions first. Hearts Afire chooses to focus on regions that are hit hard by a catastrophe but are unable to receive much, if any, support.

The island of Kinatarkan, about the size of Longboat Key and with more than 7,000 residents, is one such region. On Nov. 8, after Typhoon Haiyan hit the eastern seaboard and plowed through the island of Leyte, it continued on to devastate other islands, including Kinatarkan and northern Cebu.

Hearts Afire responded quickly. Within a week of the devastation we flew to the Philippines. We immediately had meetings with Jonathan Jennings, who was heading up relief efforts, along with local Filipino authorities and food corporations that were partnering with us.

We began to rally volunteers and then went on a three-hour drive to the devastated community of Daanbantayan, in northern Cebu. Then we took Filipino outrigger bankat boats to storm-ravaged Kinatarkan.

Over the next 10 days, five Hearts Afire volunteers, along with the Jenningses and others, took various trips with multiple outriggers to provide much-needed material goods and physical support to victims of the storm. What we found were lines of hundreds of people on all sides of the island, waiting for help.

As missionaries, we know that emergencies can arise at any time, and technology is not always there to cure or diagnose a problem. So we were ready with the most intuitive and innovative techniques and medical supplies to deal with basic trauma, skin infections and posttraumatic stress.

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Techniques such as fracture stabilization with bamboo and surgical banding were used when there was no hospital. Children benefited from post-storm picture-coloring therapy. Families were taught to collect and organize the piles of debris and begin to work as a unified community to rebuild.

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As the recovery continues, Hearts Afire will support the Jenningses and other missionaries in the Philippines, who are providing material goods, plus emotional and spiritual support. Through our Philippines Relief Fund, the Jenningses have started to provide island fishermen with materials to rebuild their boats so the island can return to self-sufficiency.

In due time these fishermen will help to rebuild the homes of others on the island. This is sweat equity in its purest form. As for us, we thought we would be the ones who helped. But we were uplifted personally, as we experienced the resilience and beautiful, unified spirit of the Filipinos.

We expect to have a similar experience when we return to the Philippines June 5-15 to continue relief efforts.

Vilma M. Vega, Joseph P. Pecoraro and Rhonda Pecoraro are co-founders of Hearts Afire. For information about Hearts Afire, or to help the victims of Typhoon Haiyan, go to [www.heartsafire.us](http://www.heartsafire.us) or call [941-552-1584](tel:941-552-1584).