

"I think it's important to spend time in the places we teach about, and Dr. Becker has been very successful in spending a lot of time in the places he teaches about" — David Robinson, Professor of History



Krista Goodman/Index

Professor of History Mark Becker left Haiti days before the earthquake hit. He said he finds it difficult to talk about his previous Haitian experiences because he is reminded of the disaster. He said he knows a nun in Haiti who exemplifies courage because she refuses to leave after the earthquake.

All Eyes On: Marc Becker

Instructor traveled to Haiti before disaster struck to help the poor

BY JENNIFER LEWIS
Staff Reporter

Six days before the massive earthquake rocked the country of Haiti, Professor of History Marc Becker was there. He saw the conditions of the poorest people, made friends with those he interviewed and returned to Truman with no idea a natural disaster was about to destroy everything he had witnessed.

Becker said he had wanted to go to Haiti for years because he said he has become very interested in the Haitian slavery vault.

"It [Haiti] got its independence in a way completely different from any other country in the Americas," Becker said. "So I got more and more interested in going to Haiti, but at the same time there was a military coup that removed the president from power, so the country had become more politically unstable, more dangerous."

Becker said his opportunity to travel safely came in the form of a solidarity delegation organized by Marin Interfaith Task Force on the Americas, an organization devoted to improving human rights in Central America. He said he has gone a lot of trips organized by that organization because they are put together by connections.

Becker said there are benefits with traveling

in a formal group because it would take years for him to come up with his own travel plans and being in a group allowed him to get an in-depth look.

"We went into Cité Soleil, which some people call the most dangerous slum in the world, but we went in with people from Cité Soleil. If you wander in just as a tourist, it's probably a stupid thing to do, but going with people who live there and work there, it makes more sense."

Becker said the trip involved 10 days of interviewing human rights experts, organizations that represent marginalized people and common citizens about their treatment at the hands of UN peacekeeping troops and their experiences living in the slums. He said the earthquake was a really bad shock after having only recently been there.

"I'm never quite sure how to talk about these experiences because now I see them through the lens of the earthquake," Becker said. "For example, the place we stayed was called Matthew 25 House, and it was run by some radical nuns who had some medical training. They've apparently become one of the main field hospitals in Port-au-Prince, the capital, for providing medical aid."

"Recently, I got an e-mail from one of the people there who had been talking about doing sur-

geries without anesthesia on the kitchen table where we had eaten our meals. It's just hard to envision what it looks like."

Becker said Sister Mary Finnick, the nun in charge of the house, was a really awe-inspiring example of courage and dedication.

"She really is a nun in the way the Catholics talk about saints, in terms of just really rising to the occasion," Becker said. "When you see somebody like that who's not Haitian, who refuses to leave when things get bad and stays and helps as much as she can, that's really inspirational. The other day I heard a radio report of missionaries who were being flown out of the country, and they were saying 'Thank God we're leaving,' and I just can't respect that."

Becker heard confirmation of the death of at least one person he met, an artisan named Flo who was helping to build a brand new hotel in the coastal city of Jacmel, which collapsed during the earthquake. The rest, however, he has no way of knowing because they lived in the slums.

"I keep wondering about some of the people we met in Bel Air; but other than sending somebody in to check on them, there's no way to know," Becker said. "I mean, one of the guys we met was paralyzed because the UN had shot him,

and he lived in a very simple house. In ways, it's kind of inspiring because they have willpower to keep on fighting even though they really have very little."

Becker said he travels to places like Haiti because his academic concentration is Central American, and he likes to experience first-hand every place he teaches about.

"I'm one of those people who teaches better about something after I've seen it with my own eyes," Becker said.

David Robinson, Becker's friend and colleague in the history department, said he respected Becker's dedication to broadening his knowledge of his subject matter.

"I think it's important to spend time in the places we teach about, and Dr. Becker has been very successful in spending a lot of time in the places he teaches about," Robinson said. "I'm often very impressed by the number of international meetings he goes to."

Truman alumnus Kent Buxton said he took five classes with Becker as an undergraduate and decided to minor in history because he was inspired by Becker.

"He'll sometimes disappear for a couple of class periods because he's off somewhere," Buxton said. "He often does election monitoring, making sure that elections are democratic and not rigged. He works with indigenous peoples and really cares about their rights."

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Marc Becker
Professor of History

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