

# The Dallas Morning News

## Haitian earthquake survivor finds medical care, strength in Dallas



Mariline Jean, 24, long had dreams of coming to the United States. But the Haitian woman figured it would be as an accountant, not as a patient who needed surgeries, prosthetics and rehabilitation after January's monster earthquake.

quieted. In the darkness of her 16th-floor room, she could hear disembodied voices of classmates in the rubble at the University of Port-au-Prince.

One by one, they called out "goodbye" and fell silent.

Mariline, 24, was one of few survivors in a pancaked four-story building. Prayer got her through nearly three days in that concrete tomb. She was sure that God must have had a plan.

Hadn't a stranger called out to Mariline like an angel in the darkness, asking for a family phone number? Hadn't that angel called Mariline's brother and then disappeared? Hadn't her brother spotted her in her pink blouse and dug her out of the rubble?

Who but God could have sent U.S. doctors and nurses who worried over Mariline and got her to Texas for life-saving medical care? She and her family prayed that their nightmare that started with the Jan. 12 earthquake would end in Dallas.

Mariline asked everyone she met in Dallas the same question. Her new American friends stammered and changed the subject.

No one mentioned the unintended consequences of well-intentioned U.S. medicine, money and kindness. All that largesse hardened Mariline's faith into expectation. She kept asking.

"Thank you so much!" she'd say in the few English words she knew. Then she'd trill in French: "Can you help me stay here?"

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Photography by LARA SOLT / The Dallas Morning News

Late at night, when she couldn't sleep, Mariline Jean felt her left leg through the hospital bed sheets.

She knew it was an apparition from a half-hemisphere away. The Americans who amputated her crushed leg in March said she might feel it, just as she still felt the left arm that had to be cut off days after Haiti's earthquake.

Strange as that ghost leg felt, it was less disconcerting than other visitations that kept Mariline awake long after the Dallas hospital



Though often in pain, Mariline remains committed to rehab and exercises. In addition to relearning basic skills such as getting out of bed and bathing herself, Mariline also is learning English.



Dr. Craig Hobar (right) and his team performed Mariline's final surgery, a skin graft to cover her leg stump, in May. Hobar and his wife have said they would support her like parents.

## 'One Patient'

Mariline's journey to Texas began with an e-mail titled "One Patient."

After a sleepless March night, nurse practitioner Linnea Trageser wrote every colleague with the LEAP Foundation of Dallas. Of a thousand earthquake survivors treated by the medical mission group, Mariline was the only one they couldn't help in Port-au-Prince.

Trageser knew it seemed crazy to focus on one patient amid hundreds of thousands of injured Haitians. Yet for Trageser and dozens of other LEAP medical volunteers who cared for her in Haiti, Mariline's promise and her suffering embodied Haiti's hope and heartache.

The youngest of a farmer's eight children, Mariline was the first in her family to go to college. Before the earthquake, she had expected to graduate in July with an accounting degree. Her family had counted on her dream to succeed in Haiti and get them to America.

After the quake, Mariline couldn't walk, feed herself or sign her name. Her surviving right arm was useless from nerve damage that couldn't be assessed, much less treated, in Haiti. Infection had so ravaged her lower left leg that it needed to be amputated, soon, to save her.

Mariline was too anemic to endure another amputation without a blood transfusion. A volunteer had to beg at every hospital in Port-au-Prince to procure a few units of Mariline's blood type. Trageser feared they'd never find more.

Mariline's shy humor and spunk were fading. She sobbed about the Haitian view that anyone so handicapped must be cursed. A disability was a shameful family burden in a country where most people lived on less than \$2 a day.

"Those young girls, who's going to put up with them?" Mariline recalled a Haitian man blurting about her and another amputee.

Mariline declared that she'd rather die than lose another limb. Her oldest sister, Myriam, refused to sign the papers to permit the leg amputation.

Trageser believed that saving Mariline would take what LEAP hadn't tried and few disaster teams in Haiti accomplished: getting a patient to a medical center in the United States.

"Without it, well, I don't know what will happen," Traseger wrote. "It is breaking my heart."

## Having faith

In Dallas, plastic surgeon Craig Hobar read the e-mail and prayed. He wasn't sure how they'd do it. He just had faith. LEAP was in the business of medical miracles.

Since starting LEAP in 1991, Hobar had led volunteer surgical teams around the world to treat kids with deformities.

But LEAP had never rushed a patient to the U.S. for emergency care. The surgeon asked Suzanne Appell, a scheduler in his Dallas surgical practice, to figure out how to do it.

Appell soon had Washington bureaucrats working weekends to speed Mariline's visa. A senior Haitian official tracked down needed documents in Port-au-Prince, e-mailing updates with smiley faces. "It's a God thing," Appell kept saying.

Buoyed by the prospect of going to Dallas, Mariline agreed to have her left leg amputated below the knee.

A week later, she was carried off a jet at Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport. She was weak but beaming, with a LEAP surgeon at her side. Trailing behind was Myriam.

Mariline was the first Haitian earthquake patient sent to a North Texas hospital. At the time, she was among fewer than 60 Haitian survivors allowed into the U.S. under medical parole visas.

That afternoon, Mariline was in Baylor University Medical Center. The hospital took Mariline as a patient through its Faith in Action mission program. Hand surgeons and plastic surgeons, infection and rehabilitation specialists from Baylor and UT Southwestern Medical School agreed to help treat her.

"How are you doing, sweetie?" Hobar boomed to Mariline just before she was wheeled into an operating room. "You have thousands of friends here. And we're going to take very, very good care of you."

After she was anesthetized, Hobar and a partner spoke about how tiny Mariline looked and what she had endured. Her body was covered with scars.

Six inches below her left knee, her leg ended with an open wound. It was swollen from the antibiotic-resistant staph infection that destroyed her lower leg. Hobar worried aloud about having to remove more if they couldn't kill the infection. That could make it hard to use an artificial limb.

The surgeons cut bits of dead tissue and discussed the prognosis. "It'll be a home run if we can save this," Hobar said. "And I think we will."

The next afternoon, Mariline chattered in a hospital room filled with flowers, suitcases and new clothes. She looked vibrant, thanks to a transfusion of three units of blood.

"Her face looks bigger," Myriam declared in Creole to Guy-Edoard Marseille, a Haitian friend of the Hobars. Marseille told everyone in English, "In the Haitian culture, it's important that you not look so frail."

Someone took pictures and asked if Mariline wanted to send them to Haiti. She said she'd need to see them first. "She doesn't want to send pictures of things that her relatives in Haiti can't have," Marseille said.

Two men arrived and explained that their company would give Mariline a prosthetic arm. Mariline's eyes widened at news that one of the men had an artificial arm.

Men in scrubs walked in. Hobar introduced one with a flourish: "This is the world's best hand surgeon!" After a brisk examination, the hand surgeon, Sean Bidic, talked about a nerve transplant.

## 'A great chance'

A week later, in a Baylor operating room, Bidic peered through microscopic lenses at Mariline's arm. It would be devastating if her ulnar nerve had been cut; that controlled her grip and major hand muscles.

The surgeon saw bands of yellow in the exposed muscles. Mariline described feeling shocks as she lay in the rubble. Stringy yellow tissue was a telltale remnant of electrical burns. Mariline's ulnar nerve wasn't cut – only compressed in cooked muscle. Once the surgeon excised that, he saw a white thread of healthy nerve. He tweaked it. Mariline's fingers flexed.

"I couldn't have expected this," he said. "She's got a great chance of all this growing back."

The next day, Hobar's wife, Robin, took the sisters home. Myriam giggled and Mariline got hiccups at the sight of the Hobars' two-story North Dallas house. In Haiti, the women shared a tiny flat with a brother. The Hobars' country-French, fieldstone cottage looked like the happy ending to a Texas-size fairytale.

The homecoming became a party when Myriam mentioned it was her 32nd birthday. Robin produced a cake with trick candles that reignited when Myriam made a wish and blew. It took everyone's help to blow out the candles. Myriam fed Mariline the first piece of cake.

## Chills and fever

At the Hobars' house, the sisters reveled in an upstairs bedroom where electricity always worked. They got pedicures and presents. They fell in love with Robin's pasta. They devoured French-dubbed American movies – starting with the tale of a homeless black teen adopted by a wealthy white family.



Before the quake, Mariline was on her way to becoming her family's first college graduate. When she arrived in Dallas, she was unable to walk, feed herself or sign her name.

Then, they had to return to Baylor. Mariline faced the exhausting work of rehabilitation. She had to relearn everything – to get out of bed, to feed herself, to bathe, to walk.

Adding to the challenge, Baylor's staff spoke no French or Creole. The hospital hired a French-speaking interpreter for Mariline's daily rehab sessions. Otherwise, everyone mimed and made do.

The strain became overwhelming when the sisters met another Haitian earthquake patient. Soon after hearing the woman's harrowing story, Mariline shivered with chills and fever.

Her fever spiked to 104 each afternoon, near the time that the earthquake struck. Doctors diagnosed malaria.

Myriam got sick, too, from spoiled leftovers. She couldn't understand warnings not to eat takeout left overnight on a window ledge. The language and culture gaps sometimes seemed unbridgeable.

Mariline curled into a fetal position and refused physical therapy. She glowered at a psychiatric nurse who kept asking weird American questions about feelings. Mariline wailed that America made Myriam mean. Eyes flashing, Myriam yelled back that Mariline had forgotten the respect due oldest siblings in a proper Haitian family.

Their family kept calling and asking: Were they comfortable? Were they eating? Would they stay?

"We're going to pray for that," Myriam said.

Linnea Trageser arrived just in time, visiting in late April. When she walked into the hospital room, Mariline was sitting in bed in a pink shirt that said, "Love."

Mariline squealed. Trageser hugged her favorite patient and cried. She kept saying, "Look at you!"

"I was expecting her to look good. I didn't expect she'd look so at home," Trageser said, wiping tears. "She's just exactly where she needs to be."

## The prospect of returning

In mid-May, Mariline left Baylor. That same day, Hobar did a skin graft to cover her leg stump. Everyone beamed as she took a pen in her right hand and signed papers for the last of more than a dozen operations.

Mariline soon got a prototype of her prosthetic left arm and began learning to use it. A psychiatrist prescribed sleeping medication and antidepressants and diagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder. Mariline also saw a French-speaking psychologist.



Libby Wethington, also an amputee, helps Mariline get familiar with her prosthetic leg. Mariline has expressed fear about returning to her homeland, where many view those with disabilities as cursed.



Joking about getting them ready for "prom night," Robin Hobar took the sisters to buy dresses for a gala for the North Texas Haitian-American community.

At the gala, everyone stood as Hobar rolled Mariline in a wheelchair to be introduced as a hero. Mariline looked blank as Hobar told the crowd that she wanted to go back and help Haiti.

Little else was said about going home. The sisters went on the Hobars' Florida family vacation. Mariline hopped up beach house stairs and made her own

way to the ocean. Myriam fished in the surf all week, and Mariline caught the biggest fish of anyone in the Hobar family.

Once back in Texas, Mariline got fitted for a donated prosthetic leg at the Dallas office of Hanger Inc. Five months after the earthquake, Mariline walked 15 feet, on her new leg. She laughed, not holding onto anything.

Robin cheered and took pictures. Myriam watched silently. Mariline asked about wearing the leg in the shower. Then she asked her constant question: Could the prosthetist help her stay?

Late that week, Hobar asked a Haitian friend to translate a delicate conversation. The Hobars needed to talk about the sisters' going home.

The sisters wept. They said they expected to stay because they'd been treated like family. For the first time, they explained that their family in Port-au-Prince was homeless after the quake. Returning to Haiti would mean living in a tent or exile in the countryside where disabled people stayed closeted.

Robin cried. The surgeon looked stricken. He asked the sisters about hopes and dreams. They mumbled, "I don't know."

The next night, the Hobars tried again. They'd waited to talk about returning to Haiti, the surgeon said, because Mariline had to focus on healing.

"Before, I used to do everything by myself," Mariline cried. "There's nothing that I will be able to do."

The Hobars said they'd support her like parents. Nothing had to happen overnight. Mariline asked about finishing college and learning computers. She said she wanted to help disabled Haitians.

"When they think they can't do anything, and they see how smart and successful you are, that's going to change Haiti!" the surgeon boomed.

"Are you happy?" he asked.

"Yes," Mariline sniffled.

"Your life is different than it was before," the surgeon said. "You're a very special person who God's going to use to change Haiti."

In early August, Mariline strode into Advanced Arm Dynamics' clinic in Irving. On her 12th visit, she walked with only a slight limp. When the clinic staff first met Mariline, she had been in a wheelchair and weak from earthquake injuries. Now, she looked confident and well. She opened doors with a right arm that had been useless and as tiny as an emaciated child's. Mariline's arm was now buff from nightly workout competitions with her sister, the surgeon and his wife at the Hobars' home gym.

Staffers marveled. Robin said Mariline was in her second month of English classes. She added that her husband would soon return to Haiti to find a house for the sisters and visit a hospital that wanted to hire Mariline.

Mariline asked to take home the cast used to build her arm. Staffers happily signed it. "You are a rock star!" wrote prosthetist Rob Dodson.

"Thank you so much!" Mariline told everyone in English. She paused at a map on a wall. Dodson said pins on the map represented clinic patients. He asked, "Where do you want to put your pin?"

Mariline pointed at the tiny hooked outline of Haiti. "I live in Port-au-Prince," she said, helping place a pin there.

"Cool!" Dodson said. "Someday, I want to come visit you."

"OK!" Mariline said, smiling.

The next night, Mariline helped Hobar greet his newest Haitian patient, a 7-week-old baby with a life-threatening jaw deformity.

"You're in great hands," Mariline told the baby's mother in Creole when she stepped off an air ambulance with her son at Love Field. "You've got a lot of friends here."

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