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Utah millionaire Jeremy Johnson mounts own Haiti aid operation

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By ISTRACACHECO, Associated Press Writer

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JIMANI, Dominican Republic (AP) -- When Utah millionaire Jeremy Johnson saw news reports of Haiti's suffering, it wasn't enough to just pick up the phone and donate money.

He mounted his own relief mission.

Johnson began organizing the effort with friends and business partners in St. George, Utah, immediately after the Jan. 12 earthquake. Within three days he was ferrying food, doctors and medicine into Haiti from the Dominican Republic, using two personal jets and helicopters.

He set up camp on a dusty soccer field in Jimani, a town just across the border from Haiti. Inside a tent, a table is covered by a large map of Hispaniola, the island that is home to the two countries. Giant boxes of diapers, powdered milk, oatmeal, water and sleeping bags are everywhere.

An electrical generator hums in the background as a dozen volunteers take inventory, haul boxes to waiting helicopters and exchange emails with donors in Utah. It's a bare-bones operation: A few fans provide the only relief from the 90-degree (30-degree Celsius) heat, and a small refrigerator cools the energy drinks he is constantly downing.

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Four colleagues flew down with him. The only sign that they get any rest is a few inflatable mattresses and pillows piled in a corner under the tarp.

At 34, the Internet entrepreneur has amassed a fortune large enough to fund the bulk of his aid effort, which included buying two more helicopters in the Dominican Republic after realizing he needed more distribution power.

"I am a person who has been blessed," Johnson told The Associated Press this week after arriving at the camp following a long day of visiting isolated communities on the outskirts of Port-au-Prince. "To sit back and relax and send a little money or whatever, it just made me feel ungrateful."

Sweat trickles down Johnson's freckled face as he talks about being a problematic kid who barely graduated from high school. Clad in worn jeans, T-shirt and sneakers, a baseball cap pulled over his red hair, he looks more like a kid than a successful businessman.

Barbara Johnson, his mother, said he started a stucco business at 21 and quickly moved into Internet endeavors. She said the success of those businesses have left him with the means to help many.

Some of those businesses, however, have drawn scrutiny.

The Utah Division of Consumer Protection hit Johnson's current business, iWorks Inc., with dozens of citations between 2006 and 2007 for allegedly engaging in deceptive and fraudulent practices. The cases were dismissed after the company, which sold "how-to" programs to people seeking government grants or loans, agreed to change its sales tactics and gave refunds to unhappy customers.

The Better Business Bureau has given iWorks an F, its lowest rating, following 30 complaints in 36 months. All but one of those has been resolved, according to the bureau's Web site.

And in February 2001, the Securities and Exchange Commission charged Johnson with making false statements, after he recommended that investors buy stock in a company without divulging he was a stockholder. The case was settled without an admission of wrongdoing.

None of those issues seems to have interfered with his altruistic work.

He has used his jets and helicopters to rescue lost and trapped hikers in the middle of the mountains in Utah, and provided a home for boys pushed out of a Utah polygamist sect.

Utah Attorney General Mark Shurtleff, to whom Johnson donated \$50,000 in 2008, praised Johnson's volunteer work.

"He's just incredible," said Shurtleff, who has been trying to help Johnson cut through red tape to get orphans out of Haiti. "I've gone to him many times when we need money for (charities)."

Johnson said his rescue work in Utah helped give him confidence he could pull off something similar in Haiti. But when he arrived in the capital with boxes of food, people were so anxious for the help that they rushed the helicopter and it became "really dangerous," Johnson said.

Haitian bureaucracy has presented problems, requiring him to file

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large amounts of paperwork and buy flight insurance. He has also grown frustrated with the aid effort, seeing boxes of food piling up at the Port-au-Prince airport.

"As a result I even stole," he said, explaining that he loaded his helicopter with boxes of aid sitting on the tarmac and took it to small towns that needed it. "No one has arrived in these places. There is a lot left to be done."

While he distributes aid in Haiti, 100 people -- including his wife -- coordinate, raise money and collect goods back home. Many of them are from a Mormon congregation and have created a Web page called Utah Haiti Relief to collect money.

"I know that (this) is just probably a scratch on the surface, but to the people we are getting to, it makes a difference," he said.

As the father of two daughters, ages 2 and 6, the hardest thing for him is to see all the orphans.

"I'm not an emotional person at all," he said, "and I cried more in the last two days than in my whole life."

He is working with Maison des Enfants de Dieu -- Children of the House of God -- orphanage to help about 130 young children get out of the country, most to waiting adoptive families. He says he got 21 children visas and sent them to the United States on Thursday.

In the long term, Johnson hopes to continue raising money to buy construction materials to help rebuild homes.

"My life is going to change from this, there is no doubt," he said.

Associated Press Writers Jennifer Dobner and Paul Foy contributed to this story from Salt Lake City.

On the Net: <http://www.utahhaitirelief.org/>

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