

Utah united with Haitian children

Aid » Some families have worked for years to get their children.

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David Aitken, of Eagle Mountain, holds his adopted son Yonelson, 4, at the His House Children's Home in Miami Gardens, Fla., on Saturday. Sixty-six Haitian orphans arrived in Miami at 7:10 p.m. Friday. (Photo by Chris Detrick / The Salt Lake Tribune)

Miami Gardens, Fla » David and Yonelson Aitken wore matching father-and-son smiles that said it all: The boy is home and his new life now begins.

"We spent five weeks total with him in Haiti and he never smiled," Aitken said, clasping the beaming 4-year-old to his chest shortly after their reunion at His House Children's Home in Miami Gardens, Fla.

As for his own ear-to-ear grin? "Oh, I'm ecstatic," Aitken said.

Earlier Saturday, Aitken and his wife Candice, of Eagle Mountain, welcomed a bashful Nerlande, 5, in much the same way: Candice swept the tiny girl into her arms seconds after the child stepped slowly out of a van at the His House complex.

"Just one more and we're going to be a family," Aitken said.

The missing child is Fabrice, their 8-year-old son, who was not allowed to board the Utah Hospital Task Force's chartered Sun Country jet Friday with 66 other children because of incomplete paperwork. The task force is still working to get the children left behind to the U.S.

For nearly three harrowing weeks, the Aitkens and other families, whose adoptions were handled by two Utah agencies, have bounced between hope and despair over their children's fate after a Jan. 12 earthquake reduced much of Haiti to rubble.

That continued Friday, when word on whether the children would be allowed to leave Haiti and where the parents could meet them seemed to change by the minute.

By early evening, after hearing the plane had landed in Miami and the children would be processed there, the Aitkens and other Utah families booked all night flights to Florida to pick up children they had been, in most cases, trying to adopt for years.

Roger and Carol Carroll of West Bountiful had less than an hour to reach the Salt Lake City International Airport to catch a flight to Miami after confirming their daughter Mia had made it to the U.S.

"I can't believe [it is done] after all this little girl's been through and what we've been through," said Carol Carroll, as she cuddled 8-year-old Mia, whose adoption began in 2005. "It's like we have one foot in each world."

That is, in the past and, now, a promising future.

Added Roger: "Everybody was praying her home."

Some families were able to leave with their children Friday night as officials speedily processed their papers. Federal staff worked around the clock as parents arrived. By Saturday afternoon, more than half of the Utah group's children had been cleared and sent home with their parents, said Jesse Moore, an assistant spokesman with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The Carrolls were prepared for a several-day wait and were almost stunned at how smoothly it went once they arrived at His House. Roger grew teary-eyed as he thanked His House staff.

Throughout the day, parents trickled into the main office on the campus of His House, an interdenominational mission that contracts with Florida to provide foster care and adoption services.

This was the second planeload of children transitioned into the U.S. at His House, said Director Iris Marrero. The new arrivals, who left Haiti with only the clothes they wore, were bathed, fed and given a good night's rest before donning a new set of clothes to meet their parents.

"This is their gateway to the rest of their lives," Marrero said. "We're the welcome party."

Some parents played with their children in a courtyard while others cradled travel-weary and bewildered youngsters.

"She doesn't get what's going on," Carol Carroll said of Mia, who was perfectly content to be held as she munched a Quaker Oats snack bar.

The Carrolls, who speak a smattering of Creole, and other parents acknowledge that what their children need most now is love and a slow introduction to a culture and, in many cases, an environment that is totally foreign to them.

In their travel bag, the Carrolls stuffed a "big fancy pink coat" that will be pulled out before Mia arrives in Utah.

Many families were staying in Florida overnight before beginning the trek home.

Among them: Kate and Mark Woodward of Smithfield, who will be bringing home Rolando, 14, and Gislene, 7, a tiny wisp of a girl who appears half her age because of severe malnutrition.

Rolando speaks only Creole but there was no mistaking his feelings Saturday.

"He keeps hugging me and smiling," said Kate Woodward, who said Rolando's schedule for the weeks to come is filled with "relaxation and time to adapt to being in the family."

The Woodwards have a full house waiting for the pair at home -- including seven other adopted children, three from Haiti.

"Even before the earthquake, the need there was so huge it was just unbelievable," said Kate Woodward, who has traveled to Haiti seven times. "We decided if we were going to bring more children into our family, we wanted to reach out to the ones who otherwise would have no life at all."

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