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Former Bucs kicker and developer team up to rebuild in Haiti

By Meg Laughlin, Times Staff Writer

Developer and the Gramatica brothers team up to offer both in Haiti.

On the anniversary of the earthquake that killed more than 230,000 Haitians - many of them in the ruins of their own homes - an unlikely alliance has formed to bring safe, sturdy housing to a village near Port-au-Prince.

The players: former Tampa Bay Bucs placekicker Martin Gramatica, his brothers Bill and Santiago, and Mike Wnek, an Auburndale developer who has helped build schools and orphanages in Haiti for more than a decade.

The Gramatica brothers, all former kickers, are now in the building materials business in Sarasota. Their "structural insulated panels" - sandwiches of a cement composite with polystyrene insulation in the middle - will be used to build a half-dozen new homes in the seaside community of Simonette.

"More than anything, it's the children in Haiti that take my heart and keep me going back," said Wnek, who raised the money for the homes. "In spite of unimaginable tragedy and horrible conditions, they never lose hope."

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Wnek, 59, flew to Haiti to join in the relief effort two days after last year's Jan. 12 earthquake.

Despite conditions that stymied most aid workers - rubble in the roads and no transportation or supplies - he managed to get from the Dominican Republic to Port-au-Prince in a big flatbed truck loaded with bread, juice and water.

The story of how he fed hundreds of starving people was told in the *St. Petersburg Times* a week after the earthquake. When the Gramatica brothers read about Wnek, they knew they wanted to meet him.

"He cares about people in need. He gets things done under tough conditions and he's a builder - all things that matter to us," said Martin Gramatica.

The Gramatica name is familiar to football fans everywhere. Martin, 35, kicked for the Bucs for six years, including the 2002 Super Bowl season. Bill kicked for the Arizona Cardinals, New York Giants and Miami Dolphins, and Santiago set numerous records at the University of South Florida.

In 2007, two years after Hurricane Katrina, Martin signed with the New Orleans Saints. He was struck by the lingering, widespread hurricane damage in the city and the slowness to rebuild.

When he retired because of injuries in 2008, he and his brothers decided to research safe, easy-to-build homes for people displaced by natural disasters.

They formed Gramatica SIPS International; SIPS stands for structural insulated panels. They rented a warehouse in Sarasota, hired a staff of designers, project managers and engineers, and set to work.

A few months after the Haiti earthquake, Bill Gramatica made an appointment with Wnek to show him the panels.

"When I saw them, a light went off in my head," Wnek said. "They're durable but lightweight like wood. They're rot-proof and termite-proof, and easy to put together - perfect for Haiti."

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On Friday, Creole translator Frantz Vil parked his SUV on a dirt road in Simonette, a seaside community of 300 people about 25 miles northwest of the capital. With a *Times* reporter on the other end of his cell phone, he walked past wandering cows, banana and mango trees and plots of rubble, describing it all as he went.

Along the way he talked to families living in crude tents and tin sheds, waiting for their Gramatica homes to be built.

The three-room homes will have front porches, a cistern for water and three electrical outlets. They cost about \$15,000 each, everything included. Wnek raised \$45,000 from friends and associates for the first three, and the Gramatica brothers are furnishing the panel sandwich walls and treated wooden roof boards for less than their cost. Once these homes are up, they plan to build three more. All six foundations have already been laid.

The families spend part of each day on the foundations, sitting on the cool slabs or putting rickety tables and chairs on them to play dominos. Children bounce balls on the smooth concrete.

"They are our homes before they are built," Chilande Raymond, 37, told translator Vil.

A year ago today, Raymond, a fish vendor in the local market, was cooking dinner for her four children in her house - a mini-vault of concrete block with a corrugated tin roof - when the walls caved in, knocking her 12-year-old son unconscious. The boy still has terrible headaches.

On today's anniversary, the people of Simonette will pray and sing, Raymond said, but "mostly lie down and mourn."

Calling the Gramaticas and Wnek "those white men from New York" (though they're not from New York), Raymond asked to have wood, not cement, in her home.

"Tell them we are afraid of cement in Haiti now," she said.

Wnek said he understands her fear because so many poorly reinforced cement homes and buildings in Haiti crumbled in the earthquake. But he stands by the Gramatica cement compound panels, saying they are "much safer" than the cement structures that caved in.

"If a panel happened to fall on you, which is unlikely because of the strength of the fasteners, ties and steel spines holding it in place, it might bruise you up a little, but it's lightweight and won't kill you," he said.

Andre Filiatraut, director of earthquake engineering research at SUNY Buffalo in New York, is one of 10 American inspectors sent by the United Nations to figure out how Haiti should be rebuilt, given the possibility of hurricanes and earthquakes.

The challenge, Filiatraut said, is to prepare for both, which requires "opposite building principles." With wind, you want a heavy roof to prevent overturning, but with an earthquake you want lightness. "The key is in the anchoring," he said.

In a conference call, University of Miami structural engineering professor Gerry DeMarco quizzed Wnek about the Gramatica buildings. He asked detailed questions about the anchoring - the fasteners, foundation and materials for the 12-by-40-foot houses.

DeMarco's conclusion: "They're certainly adequate and much better than what people in Haiti had before," he said.

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As Vil walked down a dusty path in Simonette, Many Aristile came out of the tin shed where she stores the charcoal she sells. She has slept in the shed since her home caved in a year ago. In Creole, she asked where "the big man with the loud voice" - Wnek - was, and when he would bring his "friends," the Gramatica brothers, to help them build their homes.

Aristile was outside when the earthquake hit. But her children and grandchildren were inside her cement block house, and she thought they had been killed when it crumbled. For days, she bellowed with grief - until they were found alive.

"A year later," she said, "everyone who went through the earthquake is still a little crazy."

A World Health Organization report says that many Haitians still think they feel aftershocks and have regular panic attacks. Like Aristile, they also have insomnia and nightmares.

"If I am in a safe, beautiful home with my family, I think I might rest again," she said.

In early February, the Gramatica brothers and Wnek will send the materials for the new houses by ship to Haiti. When the goods clear customs, they will go to Simonette, hire villagers and teach them how to build the homes.

"We can't wait to get these people out of the mud," said Martin Gramatica.

Times researcher Caryn Baird contributed to this report.

810,000 People still living in 1,150 tent and shack encampments, according to U.N. estimates

3,600+ Dead from cholera and more than 155,000 sickened since an outbreak began in October

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