Helping Haiti

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To Christa Brelsford, sustainable development is not about building a perfect world, it’s about building one that works. Brelsford became interested in sustainability through her favorite undergraduate class—Engineering for Developing Communities. After graduation, she built on that interest, completing the one-year MA in Climate and Society at Columbia before beginning a PhD in sustainability at Arizona State University.

Just after New Year’s, Brelsford and her brother Julian went to Haiti, where she began an informal feasibility study of a proposed retaining wall in a small town near Port-au-Prince intended to help protect the town from flooding caused by hurricanes. Brelsford hoped to find a less expensive and simpler solution that also would address the root cause of the flooding.

“When you design something for the developing world, you still need to make it fit with existing infrastructure and existing conditions,” said Brelsford. “If you have a half million dollars to spend, it would probably be better spent on reforestation efforts.”

Today, Brelsford may not do much design and construction work, but she does see her role as building bridges within the development community. Her ability to quantify problems in particular has helped her make connections across the many disciplines. “Understanding what you’re trying to count and why you’re trying to count it are all questions an engineer deals with every day, but not everyone in the world has practice with that,” she said. “It’s a pretty useful and unique skill set I bring to the developing world.”

Now she also brings some firsthand experience with the effects and aftermath of a natural disaster. On January 12, Brelsford and her brother were at a friend’s house checking their e-mail when a 7.0-magnitude earthquake devastated western Haiti. The house collapsed, pinning under the rubble Christa’s right leg, which later had to be amputated below the knee.

Brelsford and her family recently established Christa’s Angels, a foundation intended to help the country recover from the earthquake. Just one more way that she is helping build a world that works.