

For me, the highlight of the mission week took place on Tuesday, watching 75 people from Petit Trou file into the 2nd grade classroom to hear a briefing by 3 loan officers from Fonkoze. This was a long-awaited milestone in the economic development of Petit Trou. Fonkoze is Haiti's premier microcredit agency, modeled on the Grameen "Banking for the Poor" model invented by Mohammad Yunus, winner of the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize. Fonkoze makes very small unsecured loans to poor women in "solidarity groups" of five, who co-sign each other's loans and attend progress report meetings as a group. To pre-qualify, a client must take classes in literacy, business planning, budgeting, health care practices, and self-empowerment. Repayment rates average 98-99%. (to learn more, go to [www.fonkoze.org](http://www.fonkoze.org))

Over two years ago, Fr. Kesner and Don Snyder began negotiations with Fonkoze to locate a satellite office at St. Paul's Mission. There is intense competition among Haitian communities to "land" a Fonkoze office. Persistence and the completion of our Women's Resource and Education Center convinced Fonkoze that we were committed long-term to the women of Petit Trou.

Although Mohammad Yunus is an economist who invented a radical banking strategy, he won the Nobel Prize in Peace, not Economics. Alternative banking for the poor is a tested means for an individual to pull herself out of hopeless poverty, the birthplace of violence. The genius of microcredit is combining the power of group support and accountability with the spirit of entrepreneurial individualism.

I felt privileged to be present at this first recruitment meeting. It was a special thrill to watch the faces of the women and see hope being born there. Throughout the meeting, I watched an elderly woman in the front row, who listened intently, nodding and smiling widely, as though decades of her experience were at last being validated.

Melissa Mahaney