

Colorado Haiti Project  
June 2004 Mission Trip

### **A Personal Perspective**

After a night in the surreal luxury of the Hotel Montana in Port-au-Prince, we board our hired transportation, a Haitian bus, brightly painted on the outside, and like Haiti itself, in disrepair and soiled on the inside. Atop the bus, a sea of duffle bags, plastic tubs, cases of food, bottled water and several Haitian passengers complete the load. We follow the jeep that leads us out of Port-au-Prince through Carrefour and on towards our destination. We weave our way through chaotic traffic strewn with bicycles, tap-taps and pedestrians. Street markets overflow the sidewalks making passage difficult. Frayed telephone and electric lines, crumbling and sometimes abandoned buildings, decorated with spray painted slogans reflecting the ongoing political turmoil, are the background for the garbage and filth that is everywhere. Somehow humanity overcomes its surroundings and continues to go about the daily chores required to survive. The poverty rivals any I have seen elsewhere. Even lacking the numbers, the masses of India, my personal standard for the depths of poverty, it seems quite overwhelming. How can anyone or anything make a difference here? It is a difficult question to answer, yet our small group seems determined and we are after all 'on a mission'.

We continue on our way. The face of poverty gradually changes from the utter filth and squalor of the city, to just plain, subsistence living in the more rural environments. The rural poverty, which seems somehow softer, gentler, even a bit romantic, is nevertheless still difficult, still harsh, still heartbreaking. Young children spend a good portion of their day walking, sometimes miles, to fill a few plastic jugs with potable water. Women carry their goods atop their heads, again walking long distances to the nearest street market in hopes of selling a few plantains, a few mangos, a cheap pair of shoes or a coca cola. Many of the goods they will sell were bought on credit at exorbitant rates of interest, courtesy of the local loan shark. Peasant huts of one or two rooms, made with combinations of rock, mud, banana bark, palm fronds, concrete, sticks and sheet metal, serve as overcrowded shelter for several generations of family. There is little space but for a cot and a small table. Leaky roofs are the norm. Small fires burn in the distant hills as the production of charcoal, the primary source of fuel for cooking, continues. What little of the countryside that remains unspoiled is beautiful . . . in all other respects like paradise. How can such misery be carved out of such beauty? Another question that begs an answer.

After a day of travel over very poor roads, after crossing several shallow rivers, and in a state of sensory overload, we arrive safely at St. Paul's in Chevalier near Petit Trou de Nippes. Surrounded by rural poverty, St. Paul's is small shelter from the storm . . . the church, a small building containing a dining hall, kitchen, 2 bathrooms along with Pere Kesner's office and 1 room home, reflects man's efforts to tame this rural environment. Across a small field sits the school . . . a long, open-sided structure of sticks & sheet metal. The classrooms are divided by chalkboards that serve as the focal point for the hard wooden benches that sit on the swept dirt floors.

Our home for the next week or so will be the field next to the school. We will share this space with goats, pigs, cows, donkeys, wild dogs, roosters and hens . . . oh, and lest we forget . . .mosquitoes. Under the curious eyes of many, and careful to avoid the enclaves of fire ants, we settle into our circle of tents . . . and so our week begins.

Almost immediately, old friendships are rekindled between those who have been here before and their Haitian friends. New relationships begin just as easily for those who are experiencing Haiti for the first time. Guillo, Zachary, Mario, Ennis, Julia, Milo, Pierre, Jean Luc, Jean Fritz and so many others arrive to greet us, and at this moment, all is well with the world.

Over the next week, 3 Haitian doctors and a dentist; Dr. Genece, Dr. Mitial, Dr. Johnny and Dr. Calixte, join us. They have given their time, as we have given ours, in the hope of making some small difference in the lives of a few. During the week, our medical team consisting of Eben Carsey, M.D., Warren Berggren, M.D., Lynn Gilbert, RN, Barbara Beasley, RN & Dale Miani, PA examine and treat more than a thousand patients. Mark Leifeste, M.D. heads up the makeshift pharmacy, while Linda, Dan & Jim Rowe, Dee Jamieson, Joanie Heard and Don & Erin Snyder, support the efforts of the medical team, registering patients, taking blood pressures & temperatures, weighing babies, preparing prescriptions and providing general management and assistance when needed. In addition, Dr. Calixte pulls several hundred teeth and Joanie provides fluoride treatments. Dr. Genece holds an informal AIDS education class, Dr. Berggren instructs the local matrons (midwives) on the sterile cutting and dressing of a newborn's umbilical cord. The preliminary plans for the new school are shared and discussed with Pere Kesner and several of the teachers, the status of a water project outside of Petit-Trou is assessed, a small pond, holding high numbers of mosquito larva, is filled-in, Linda & Joanie hold art class on several occasions and last, but certainly not least, a set of soccer goals is set on a field that is prepared by the hard work of many. In this instance, grasses & bushes are cut with machete, tree roots removed & stumps burned. The goals, as well as balls and uniforms, complete with socks and cleats, were brought by Dan & Jim and the locals couldn't be happier . . . actually neither could we! The games are played to cheers, laughter and screams of delight produced by the crowd that arrives faithfully each evening for the big event. The games are merely wonderful; the sense of community is incredible!

On our last evening, Pere Kesner holds a well attended, thanksgiving service. A wonderful beginning to a magical evening of fellowship with our Haitian friends. Following dinner, a beautiful coconut cake appears. It is taken outside, where under a luminous Haitian sky it is served to far more than seemed humanly possible! Haitian music rings out of a cassette player powered by generator, and many dance well into the night. The moment is one to be embraced . . . people enjoying life. As the evening wears down, we return to our tents; exhausted and rejuvenated, smiling and in tears. It is a time for all of us to continue, and in some cases, begin to reflect on all that we have experienced this week. It is a bittersweet time. For as joyous as much of the week has been, the harsh reality of life here has changed little. There is so much to be done. The love here is strong, the relationships continue to grow and it is difficult to leave. But leave we must; and once again, we return to Colorado feeling that we have received much more than we have given.

. . . Don Snyder

