

HAITI-BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE

This past November, I accompanied Bob Hood and Father Jim Byrum to Thibeau in northern Haiti for six days. Bob Hood's Parish, St. James (Cazenovia, NY), is twinned with St. Yves Parish in Thibeau. St. Yves' Parish runs St. Joseph School. Father Jim Byrum is an Episcopal priest who works for the If Foundation which helps to support St. Joseph School.

Before the trip, I had communicated by e-mail with the principal at St. Joseph. Park Central Presbyterian Church (Syracuse, NY) had paid for the shipping of French books and school supplies donated by American students. Chittenango High School (NY) students collected six boxes of supplies. French books were donated by Nathan Lutz of Manlius Pebble Hill School (Syracuse), and French students from The Pennington School (NJ) donated French picture books they had purchased in Quebec. French students from a high school in Binghamton,

NY raised money to have the local carpenter in Thibeau make art easels for the preschool class at St. Joseph's. Students from Malone Middle School (NY) made bracelets and cards for the students. The teachers in Haiti were very appreciative of what our students had done. They requested that I visit and share teaching methods with them.

The first five days of my visit I worked at the school. While there, I had the opportunity to observe each class and teacher. I also taught a 20-minute lesson to each class. After observing and teaching, I met with the teachers and principal as a group. I had each teacher write a list of materials needed for the classroom as well as a list of types of teacher training they would like. I then met with each individual teacher and discussed the list to make sure I understood their needs.

Of the eight teachers I observed only two had college degrees and had been trained as teachers. The other six had the equivalent education of a sophomore in high school. The students were extremely well-behaved. However, much of the learning was based on rote memorization and repetition. It seemed that students were memorizing without understanding what they were memorizing. The average class size was 47 students.

The classrooms were dark. The teacher workroom/principal's office was so dark that I had to stand in the doorway to read.

The teachers have requested training in teaching methods for math, science, art,

and French. They have also requested training in child psychology and in computers. Teachers have also asked for globes, world maps, maps of Haiti, developmental puzzles and toys for the pre-school class, art materials, science posters, computers, and an illustrated French alphabet. The preschool class currently has no developmental toys or materials for children.

Father Aymre, the parish priest in charge of the school, said it is difficult to re-



tain teachers because the pay is so low. The teachers are paid the equivalent of \$600 per year.

The school currently has no electricity, running water, or computers. When the principal e-mails me, he has to go by bicycle to a cyber-cafe one hour away. It costs him \$8 an hour to use the computer at the cyber-cafe in Cape Haitian.

My first day was spent in the capital of Port-au-Prince. This was the hardest part of my trip. The people in the North had very little. In the rural north, people were able to feed themselves by having a small garden next to their homes. Thibeau was beautiful and green, surrounded by mountains which were not totally deforested.

Port-au-Prince showed me a much more severe form of poverty. There was raw sewage on the sides of the streets. There were heaps of garbage, sometimes with a pig eating the garbage. There were people everywhere selling whatever they could find. Bob Hood took me to the Infant Renourishment Center run by the Sisters of Charity. This is a place where mothers bring their babies when they can no longer feed them, in short, when the babies are dying of starvation. The center is open to volunteers twice a day who come in to feed, hold, and rock the babies. We entered one of the three rooms on the second floor. In the room were about 50 metal cribs with babies who had been brought in to be "renourished." I had only seen pictures of starving babies. This was different to be in a room with so many. Those who could

were reaching out and crying to be picked up. I picked up a little boy. He clung to me like a magnet. Carrying the little guy, I went into two other rooms full of more babies in various stages of starvation. One was on a respirator. I sat down in one of the rockers and started rocking the baby who was clinging to me...

Bob Hood and I walked back up the hills in the scorching heat and dust. I tried to breathe through my mouth instead of my nose so I wouldn't smell the sewage and the garbage in the streets. It was a 20-minute walk uphill to the Matthew 25 House where we were staying. When I got back to the comfort of the house, I thought about Haiti and the faces of the babies I had just seen. I realized that even though I had been teaching about Haiti in my classroom and had given workshops on how to teach a unit on Haiti, I had never known the reality of what I saw that day.

I knew then that I would have to come home and tell people what it was really like in Haiti. I would have to tell them that babies were starving in the city, that I saw a 12-year-old girl in Thibeau with an eye infection with pus oozing out of her eye. Her family couldn't afford the \$4 to go to the clinic. I would have to tell them that the roads were almost impassable, that there was a large pig bathing in a muddy pot-hole in the middle of the road. I would have to tell them that I saw eight-year-old girls carrying 40 pound buckets of water for miles on their heads. I would also have to tell them how uncomfortable I felt in Thibeau when I realized there was no ambulance, hospital, police force, or fire department. All of these things are what I observed before the earthquake.

I also want to tell my colleagues about the Haitian people. They are the descendants of slaves who defeated Napoleon's army with their bare hands and with spears made of sticks. They are the only people in the world who have liberated themselves from slavery. Those who are alive have survived corrupt governments, dictators, hurricanes, floods, and earthquakes. They have a strength that can only be admired. They have a beauty of spirit and a faith that is indescribable. They work harder than anyone I have ever known. They have *la joie de vivre*. St. Joseph School had almost nothing on the walls but I did notice one lonely decoration on the concrete wall of Oscar Innocent's second grade class. It was a white paper plate with a single word printed in black marker on the plate. The word was *JOIE*.

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