

Dana and I are home from Haiti, trying to re-enter into our familiar lifestyle while, at the same time, trying to understand how it is possible for a people, for a country, so close to our own, to exist solely on humanitarian efforts. It is hard to imagine that Haiti, in the 1700's, was the richest French colony, exporting cotton, coffee, bananas, cocoa, mahogany...more than all the 13 American colonies put together. So what happened?...dictators and disasters, occupation forces (including the U.S.), military coups happened, all resulting in deforestation of the mountains to make charcoal for fuel, a weak government without an army or a functioning public education system (only 5% age-appropriate literacy), 60% unemployment, inadequate medical care (not enough well-trained docs, malnutrition, endemic Malaria, TB, AIDS, high maternal and infant mortality, poor access to clean water, an average life expectancy of ~45), and even in the capital city of Port-Au-Prince (PAP) where we lived and worked, no safe drinking or hot water, and an electric grid running only several hours/day. So you may ask...why go on with the rest of this story, what is it that beckoned me once again, back to this G-d forsaken, barren land (where only UN troops provide some level of security), to leave my comfort zone, and this time...to drag Dana along as well. The answer is simple....to help out even for a short time, these beautiful people, these smiling children...trying to do more with their lives than just survive.

So here is our story.

After a 3 hour delay and prolonged de-icing, our Boeing 767 took off into the frigid New York sky, laden with over 250 mostly Haitian families, their suitcases over-stuffed with clothes and other necessities for country confined relatives, our suitcases over-stuffed with over 140lbs of medications and surgical supplies (donated by AmeriCares) and over 50lbs of art supplies; just under 4 hours later, Dana and I and David and Susan landed in PAP, where we were met by our Haitian hosts, Dr. Hubert Morquette and Dr. Jean Pierre Wawel. We would be staying at the home of Dr. Marquette and his wife, Juni, also a physician; and while Dana and Susan would be doing art projects with children at Dr. Morquette and Juni's school and orphanage, David and I would be working at Dr. Wawel's hospital, Hopital de la Paix (Peace Hospital). David has already shared with you his vivid descriptions and observations of the hospital, and his stark photos, prior to leaving Haiti prematurely to be with his mom, of the devastating poverty in PAP.

To reach Dr. Morquette's home, we held on tight as he drove over a maze of endless, unnamed, rutted dirt paths, and arrived, 15 minutes later, in front of a huge metal locked gate, the house surrounded by a 10 foot high concrete, barbed wire-topped wall; inside this massive barrier, stood a lovely, mostly concrete structure with large windows covered by iron bars; we were greeted by Juni with a warm, welcoming smile, shown to our simple, clean quarters, talked a bit (they spoke perfect English!), then went to bed, exhausted, and unsure of what lay ahead...

Dana and I awoke way before dawn to the sounds of roosters and dogs (no alarm clock would be needed all week!). A breakfast of eggs/mangoes/toast/jam, and we were off, David and I with Dr. Wawel (honking outside the gate), Dana and Susan to the orphanage and school with Dr. Morquette.

Hopital de la Paix is nothing more than just another concrete mass of three floors (all poorly lit and stark), the first floor with one consultation room (a small cubicle really with an examining table behind a curtain), a combination waiting room/ER (one old gurney in the corner), a make-shift lab and two primitive ORs, the second floor with hospital beds (there were a few patients lying on cots with old sheets and family members milling/hovering about) and a third floor kitchen/with beds for visiting docs. I would be spending my week in this first floor cubicle, with a young, bright, Haitian trained woman doctor, who, I would soon find out, was trying to practice first world medicine in the poorest country in the western hemisphere!...what a wonderful surprise! Dr. Joseph and I, along with 4-5 student nurses (yes, there are actually nursing schools, of varying quality, all over PAP) examined/treated, from dawn to dusk, patient after patient, young (I brought along a pediatric handbook...thank you, Marty!) and old...an eight month old baby with fever of 106, shaking on the gurney, being cooled and calmed (successfully!) with a bucket of water; young girls (and their partners) given the appropriate antibiotics (and sex education, too) for vaginal swab (I know, TMI) positive STD,s; patient after patient with Malaria (one hour turn around for positive blood samples) successfully treated with Chloroquine (Haiti and Central America are not yet seeing Chloroquine-resistance); patient after patient (all walking or taking tap-taps to our over-flowing waiting room of singing/praying/hopeful folks) with hypertension/diabetes/weight loss/lumps/growths/fevers/pneumonias/and a multitude of other infections (some treated clinically, the more ill referred to the General Hospital for further evaluation, chest-xrays/admission); folks with fears and anxieties, just like us...wanting to be heard, wanting to be helped.

I leave my part of the story, now, in awe of Dr. Joseph and her passion to learn about the complexities, the art, of the practice of medicine. We communicated in English and French (her English better than my French); and we talked about the importance of a thorough history (not an easy task in a population of African descendants whose word for 'yesterday' and 'tomorrow' are the same...so, they have no time reference point for the important events in their lives), a top to bottom examination, and the subtleties of diagnosis, treatment and follow-up care. I observed and smiled as she patiently and quietly discussed each patient's concerns with them, and then, would turn to me for confirmation or advice. We were a team and, in no time at all, we developed an ease with each other, so much so, that I feel confident in the knowledge that I had actually left a footprint.

This was my second time in Haiti, and I continue to be disheartened by the inconsistencies in and lack of medical care/sanitation/clean water/education/good nutrition/infrastructure/employment and, most of all, the security needed to start a process of investment that would ultimately lead to a new beginning in this impoverished land; and I have to say this again.... a land that lies so close to our own shores. I don't know the answer to Haiti's security dilemma, all I can say is that I have just finished working with a physician so dedicated, so connected to her patients and the desire to practice good medicine, and have witnessed, first hand, the dedication and commitment, year after year, of an international community of humanitarians so devoted to the survival of this nation and its people.

Hi...it's Dana, and I will try to share my experience with the children of Haiti. Aside from childbirth, this was one of the most incredible experiences of my life.

Thirty-two children live at King's Garden, the orphanage that shares a campus with Kings public school and the future Kings Hospital (already in progress), all founded by our hosts, Dr Hubert and Dr. Juni Morquette. The children live in two separate "dorm" rooms, 8-10 bunk beds in each, with no sheets or pillows, and 1/2 inch mattresses. There is no running water or electricity during the day, so the children must carry, uphill, heavy buckets (filled with water collected from a cistern), every afternoon, to keep by their outdoor showers. Breakfast, lunch and dinner, consisting mostly of rice and beans, is served outside, on long wooden tables built and donated by missionaries from the U.S. The school is all gray concrete with openings where windows may someday be placed, and inside are rows of old-fashioned desks. There is only one bathroom with enough water for one flush....

Back to the art...Susan and I were ready to share our love of art with the 50 lbs. of materials we had brought for the 90+ children. We set up our art supplies in a small space with 2 long tables. We were fortunate to have with us a wonderful Haitian translator (Lissa) who spoke English, French and Creole. The children are learning a bit of English, some French, but most spoke only Creole, especially the little ones. Everyday we presented a new art experience to each class. The children were excited to try everything. One of our first ideas was to have them close their eyes and envision their country...the people, the animals, the tap-taps. These visions would appear in their art, throughout the week, as they made collages, circle designs, mobiles, quilt pieces, butterflies, cards, jewelry and totes. They worked with markers, crayons, collage papers, beads, pipe-cleaners(a favorite), fabric markers, oil pastels, scissors and glue sticks. How amazing to have to teach a child how to uncap a marker and a glue stick! The most treasured art supply...an ordinary number 2 pencil with the all important eraser!

As part of our art week, Dr. Morquette arranged for me to go to the World Relief Organization in downtown Port-Au-Prince to have an "Art Day" with 22 volunteers, each from a different community (once again, thank goodness for Lissa!). Dr. Morquestte's hope is that these adults will share their art experiences with the children in their parishes. As anticipated, the adults took a bit longer to let go of the fear of 'messing up'; but, after an hour or so, they got into the joy of creating, and really had fun....many not wanting to leave. At the end of the day, the volunteers shared how difficult it is to find funds for art supplies in Haiti; so, as we talked, a representative from the World Relief Org. offered to supply pencils and paper to the 22 volunteers. I am in the process now of mailing out 9,000 pipe cleaners; so there will be approximately 900 pipe cleaner mobiles hanging throughout Port Au Prince in the next few weeks!

The last day in Haiti was the most extraordinary for Warren and for me. It was a Saturday, and Dr. Morquette decided to celebrate the week with a barbeque for the thirty children at the orphanage. The BBQ "pit" is an old 50 gallon oil can, turned on its side, with a pipe set through the top as a smoke hole. Wood pieces are placed inside the can,

and a mound of dirt is piled around. And voila...an oven! As Dr. Morquette barbequed the chicken pieces in the oven, I set up art "stations," on the long lunch tables, with all the art materials that we had worked with throughout the week. How wonderful to watch the children choose the materials they wanted to create with...no teaching necessary...they knew just what to do with the materials! Two hours later, the children reluctantly cleared off the tables to prepare for their special lunch. There was silence as they slowly ate their chicken pieces, corn meal and bean sauce. Dr. Morquette had also brought mangoes and watermelon. The lunch ended with the children singing a beautiful song in French/Creole to say merci....

The afternoon flew by as we played games in the small dirt courtyard....games that I somehow remembered from teaching and from my Brooklyn childhood! Such laughter and joy...These children are magnificent. It was so hard to say goodbye. They are now a part of me and I can't wait to return and be with them again.

Thanks for listening and showing such an interest in our extraordinary experience. Hopefully our photos, soon to be sent under a separate email, will allow you to understand why we are so drawn to Haiti.

We are especially grateful to have met and spent the week with two remarkable humanitarians, Dr's Hubert and Juni Morquette, whose orphanage, school, and future modern hospital offer hope for the survival of this country.

Warren and Dana

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