

Haiti, My International Community

Haiti is the poorest country, and the most disease ravaged, in the Western Hemisphere. The emotional impact of my experience in Haiti taught me the importance of human life, caring, and volunteering in an effort to make life in a third-world country better for those who are in despair.

On May 1, 2000, the plane descended down onto Port Au Prince, the capitol of Haiti. I looked out my window from a bird's eye view, and suddenly the sight of my life-changing experience began. Local residents were using upside down school buses as homes; children were playing in what appeared to be green sewage. As the plane drew closer and closer to the concrete runway, men and children of all ages ran toward the large aircraft. Before I got off the plane, I was told to safeguard all of my belongings and to not hand anything out, since we were the "Big American Men."

I was bombarded by Haitians in a policeman's disguise asking to take my bags, pushed, probed, everything like that, men and their children screaming "help us, help us!" I pushed my way through them and managed to board the little propeller plane, which would take our crew of 12 over the bay to the other side, Jeremie. I landed once again, but this time in a dark, desolate, rural field. Haitian medical personnel delivered our group to the foundation headquarters in old Mitsubishi Monteros.

Instead of using pictures, I used videotape and I captured the HHF building, the dental chairs, the food prep and service. I was quite taken with this facility, as people who donated money funded it. Before lights out, the group gave me a big round of applause because I donated \$500 to the HHF to build a "Happy House," which would be built for the poorest family in Jeremie.

I looked on as the house was being built, and the Haitian father was engraving my name in wood onto the front door, "with special thanks to the Newtown Rotary Interact Club and its president Jonathan Jossick." Proudly, I shed my first tear of my trip. Later that morning, we were hiking up a mountain, to where we would set up a satellite outpatient dental clinic made of straw, and people lined up for over two miles to have their teeth pulled. I learned that Haitians would walk for 8 miles up and down hills to receive treatment. In hot, treacherous conditions, and dangerous political unrest, this was an operation bold and daring.

I got right in there with the video tape as men and women of all ages were getting their teeth pulled. I handed them Tylenol with water and gave them instructions in French Creole for pain control. As I am not skilled in dentistry, I could only support people by keeping them calm during the operation. Some struggled, passed out, and urinated. But everyone who needed treatment received it that day. Later, a young child pulled me off to the side and we started kicking a rock back and forth to each other, and several other children partook. Soon we formed a circle, and we were basically throwing the rock to each other. I was connecting to the children.

The next day, the HHF group walked over to the second section of the clinic where lessons on malnutrition and baby formula development were taught. I weighed babies, fed them, and demonstrated the mixing procedures for formulas, which were donated to mothers, while Sister Maryanne spoke of the procedures in French Creole, and mothers paid attention. I videotaped some of the activity there, and I asked questions on what is a malnourished child vs. a nourished child. This program is critical for the survival of babies, since the mothers themselves, due to malnutrition and disease, cannot breast feed their children. Without the Americans who volunteered, a society, and its population would die out.

Making a difference feels great, but I also had to accept that a gut-wrenchingly high amount of death occurred before my eyes too. In the clinic, there were failed pre-mature deliveries, heart

attacks, and heat stroke victims. Every death is especially heart-breaking because our goal is to save people.

The most emotional part of my experience was walking through Sister Theresa's Hospital. As I walked toward the door, children were cheering and singing for the Americans who would come play with them. The nurses on staff there told me that it's not recommended that we stay longer than 5 minutes, for the fear we may get sick. But the only thing that made me sick was holding these children in my arms, and knowing that they will never leave the hospital. They are there because they need to be isolated from the village. Malnourished 14-year-old children appeared as 5 year olds. All of those children were going to die. I could not help but stay there for 4 hours and play with each and every one.

They could not be helped. They had diseases ranging from TB to HIV. But what broke my heart even worse was walking into a large room, where cribs, about 40 rows by 40 columns lay side by side. Babies lie lifeless, with vomit, dirt, and some with worm coming out of their eyes, but they were still alive. The nurses told me I couldn't hold them because they would easily bruise and bones would break. I had a hard time leaving, and it was the one thing I refused to videotape.

I realized that death comes to us all, but it shouldn't come to the ever so young who cannot help it. These are the forgotten, the sad, and the sick. No efforts from anybody could help them in the stage of death they were in. I thought that the HHF were a group of heroes at first, but we did lose many people. But for the thousands of people we helped in one short week, we improved life for those who are in the greatest of pain.

My experience is concluded with some of the sights and sounds of my experience. At night, after we ate dinner, which was mainly papaya fruit, soup and rice, I would go out onto the tall balcony that overlooked the ocean. I was so high in elevation I would actually watch a thundercloud grow, and the intensity of it was beautiful. After the storm would clear and it was dark out, I would hear the sounds of men driving large jeeps campaigning for a new Haitian Prime Minister. The night smelled of marijuana, which is not illegal for men to smoke. In the mornings, more marijuana, but the women would carry large amounts of fruit on their head, up steep hills, do the laundry, and raise the children.

That's how life is there. Since I played with children a lot, men and women would climb trees and retrieve large coconuts, cut it open, and give me the milk inside, and papaya fruit, and some had asked me to adopt their children. I accepted their gifts without hesitation since it is offensive to turn away gifts, but obviously, I could not adopt a child. Each member got a chance to reflect on the trip, but I remained quiet. At the time, my experience hit me very hard I could not put it into words. I did manage to utter that my volunteer efforts would not end here. I spent my last two hours in the nation preparing my video, taken back at some of the sites I had captured.

The emotional impact of my experience in Haiti taught me the importance of human life, caring, and volunteering in an effort to make life in a third-world country better for those who are in despair. My efforts in the international community have been marked in my heart forever, and Haiti is the forefront of my efforts. My own coming of age experience occurred in Haiti, in which I looked into the strong yet innocent heart of a child. The memory of the children in Sister Theresa's Hospital will always be in my mind, the faces, and the smiles. When it came time for me to make my speeches and present my video, I would often stop the video and explain how profound and important this opportunity was for me. I would conclude all of my speeches by reminding everyone that sometimes the most basic understanding of humanity and respect for life in a restless, suffering world is looking at it through the eyes of a child.

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