

## Reflections from Travelers Mary Palamar and Casey Flynn

### **An Excerpt from” Haiti Reflections” by Mary Palamar**

Associate, Sisters of St. Joseph, Watertown, New York

A few years ago, following the January 2010 earthquake in Haiti, the Sisters of Saint Joseph in the United States and Canada partnered with Mission Haiti and pledged \$325,000 over a period of ten years to support ten Haitian girls in primary and secondary school, provide partial financial assistance for building a secondary school and assist with the salaries and certifications of teachers. This year when Mission Haiti offered a special trip to the Federation of the Sisters of Saint Joseph, including associates, I was interested in going for many reasons. Here I will share the main reasons I undertook this journey.

1. We would meet the Haitian Sisters who run many of the schools in Haiti. They are firm in the belief that education is the best way for Haiti to move forward. We would learn from them, their teachers and students and we would be able to observe in their classrooms.
2. We would be able to meet four of the eight board members of Mission Haiti, an organization which has been supporting Haiti for over ten years; they provided the leadership for this trip.
3. Through the contacts of Mission Haiti, we would be able to visit various other sites in Haiti such as the University of Notre Dame in Port au Prince, the facility for sick children run by the Missionaries of Charity (the order founded by Mother Teresa), Jane Wynne’s farm and Ecological Reserve, and meet Father Tom Hagan, founder of Hands Together who works in one of the worst slums in Port au Prince.
4. We would be able to listen to the stories of those we met, learn about their challenges, learn about the Haitian culture and learn how visitors from other countries can enable the Haitian people to better develop and improve their country without developing a sense of entitlement.

Rather than base this reflection on a day by day account, I have organized it into several sections: Education, Ecology/Environment, Domestic Slaves (Restaveks in Haiti), Significant Leaders and Innovators in Haiti, Books on Haiti, What I Learned and finally, My Many Unanswered Questions....

### **What I Learned in Haiti**

**Gratitude** for all that I have, especially for my husband, family and friends. Gratitude for living in a safe place that does not require a ten-foot wall for safety, where there is clean drinking water and uninterrupted electricity, good roads, abundant food to select from, safe vehicles and other forms of public transportation, and gratitude for all of the things we take for granted.

**Respect and admiration** for the amazing Sisters, the Companions of Jesus, who run so many schools in Haiti and also hold down full time other jobs to raise money for their order.

**Appreciation** for Mission Haiti for providing the leadership for this immersion trip. We were not tourists; we had opportunities to visit places and hear stories from real people.

**Desire** to find the best way to use what skills I have in educating others about ways to really be of service to the Haitian people. Assistance doesn’t always mean travel.

There is much more I could write. This is just a brief reflection of the trip highlights.

### **My Unanswered Questions**

I have spent the last few days since coming home asking these questions:

- Is there truly a way to help empower the Haitian people while they still have a non-functioning government?
- Does foreign aid really work?
- Are we creating Haitian dependence on outside help and a mentality of expectations?
- What projects have sustainability?
- With so many aid organizations working in Haiti, can there be a better way of inter-organization communication about shared goals and purposes?
- How can I best share the information I learned about Haiti to do the most good?
- What further things can I do to support some of the excellent programs and services I witnessed?
- What further questions will arise as I continue to reflect on this enriching experience?

March 2016



*Kids in line for lunch at Annunciation Leogane.*

**An Excerpt from “Why Haiti? A Reflection on Traveling with Mission Haiti Inc.” by Casey Flynn**  
Mission Haiti Inc. Volunteer and Donor, Minneapolis, MN

This was my fourth trip to Haiti in the past six years. Why Haiti? I had been touched deeply by Jack and Connie Pelner's commitment and love for Haiti and its people, and by your commitment to Annunciation School in Leogane. I had to go.

I remember Jack telling me in the Miami Airport, "It is there you will meet Christ" — and he was right. His words would repeat over and over again as the sights, sounds, stories, and people unfold each time, each trip.

I believe Haiti must be one of the world's greatest paradoxes — a simple segment of an island reflecting heaven and hell, beauty and ugliness, truth and injustice, sorrow and joy, suffering and healing, destruction and constant creation, life and death, all in the extreme including the untimely and unfair dying of so many.

Yet, where there is despair, there is hope; where there are broken hearts and broken lives, there is faith, charity, and great love, also in extremes. And there are old and new dreams, envisioned and built in incredible strength and humility of mind, body and whole, Holy Spirit.

I came home the first time wanting to go back but as the year rolled on, some of my basic desire began to fade in my everyday reality of home and all its responsibilities. But I did return! At the mission house, I flopped down on a bed and having no clear idea why, I said, "I'm home!"

Why? Most important was the renewal and growing of relationships: seeing some of the same faces and smiles, exchanging a hug and a handshake, building trust, finding ways to communicate and share the journey. To build a bridge and breach the gap between worlds, to know we are real to each other and not just an experience — these are all parts of the "whys" to return and remain faithful.

You have created a safe, blooming, growing haven of education of mind and body and heart, expanding love and learning for 180 children, as well as new possibilities for their families and neighbors. Had I not returned the second, third, and now the fourth time, I don't know if I would have grasped the importance of what happens there.

The school and community of stable and phenomenal teachers offer a consistent, committed, faith-filled, happy environment; it is a joyful noise and play, an active on-going prayer, a creation of artful humanity. The Village of Jesus, a home for up to 40 abandoned mostly elderly women, is grotto of pristine, caring and goodness; true happiness resides there.

You have made the world both bigger and smaller — not only their world but yours. And you must keep the relationship growing, expanding. Yes, it takes effort and energy, giving and unconditional love as in any family or friendship. It takes forgiveness, acceptance of the unknown, overlooking the small stuff, being open and vulnerable, taking risks, and yes, sharing "the goods," as well as our personal lives and stories while embracing theirs.

Some of Haiti's basic hardships are simply due to its geography; it is hit by storms, hurricanes, mudslides, and yes, the earthquake! We learned on our recent trip that due to storms (Sandy and others) all fall that winter crops have been wiped out.

Add to that the facts that food aid is now being cut off by various funding sources and the rise in the world's food costs, and simply put, starvation is an even greater problem now that it has ever been. The staff of Annunciation Haiti is presently only able to feed the students two or three days a week. This has to change and it will, with everyone's help now.

One of our side trips included a visit to a farm up in the hills, run by a wise, gentle, strong, determined

Haitian lady who is committed to green alternative ways of farming, growing trees, preserving native plants, and teaching others. She said that years ago, she felt, "Once we were the Pearl of the Caribbean, now we are the trash heap of the world."

I never felt so sad. I asked her now if she felt this was still true? She said she hoped, partially due to the quake, that perhaps Haiti has bottomed out and that a real coming back was happening.

Which brings me back to your school in Leogane and the farm! Yes, the growing, green, phenomenal farm. The farm is alive and prospering, squawking with pigs, new chickens at Easter, cows in the field, and mango trees to be harvested in May and June. If there is a hope for Haiti's future, it is in agriculture. You are making sure Annunciation Haiti is a part of the answer and the future while contributing to the present and putting food on their tables.

Mission Haiti's friend Father Tom Hagen has founded and runs several schools and a huge daily feeding program in Citi Soleil, the worst slum in Port au Prince. In answer to the young people's (and everyone's question), "What can we do?" he explained that the saving grace lies in establishing horizontal relationships between Haiti and all the people of other countries who come to help. We should be hand in hand, not creating vertical, superior, one above the other relationships.

Father Tom also warned against romanticizing poverty, "for there is nothing good about poverty." As he explains, to romanticize poverty is to do a grave injustice and disservice to the poor. In so doing, you take away people's dignity and their own individual identity as a valuable human and divine being. For we are all unique, wanted, and loved by God. Children of God. We have to exchange our lives, our stories, cultures, traditions, talents, sorrows and dreams if we are to create heaven on earth.

This is why Haiti

Here we are, back at the crossroads of paradox like the Beatitudes: blessed are the poor in spirit not the poor in dire poverty or the down trodden. This is where Haitians have so much to teach and give us. Haitians give out of nothing; they share everything they have and are. They are grateful for the smallest of things, simple things, and grateful for the invisible — love. Love can create a lot of little visibles that give hope and light, health and learning, a little security that takes away fear; things that makes life truly worth living and not merely about struggling for survival.

You may ask, "Is there any end of feeding starving children?" Well, not as long as there is hunger. Will I feed the stranger in my city, my next door neighbor, a member of my family? The children at Annunciation School in Haiti, the women in the Village of Jesus, the Sisters of the Companions of Jesus **Error! Bookmark not defined.**, the children of Port au Prince — they are our strangers, our next door neighbors, our own children, our brothers and sisters.

We are all one, in every cell of our being we carry the burdens and triumphs of being human and beings. We always have, we are now, and will be forever. Let it be in love.

I urge you, if possible, to visit Haiti, your school, your stranger no more, your family in Leogane. If you can't, let the exchange and relationship be real in all you do and can know from here to there. And above all pray! I fall asleep praying for all I have met, held, carried, and cared for in Haiti.

Carry Haiti in your heart; be and help others become aware of our big and small world. As our friend in Haiti, Father Tom, would say, "See with your heart and speak with your eyes, and not be afraid."

Rejoice in Mission Haiti and please, keep it happening. Peace be with us.

January 2013