



Why Haiti?

by Casey Flynn

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This was my fourth trip to Haiti in the past six years. Why Haiti? I had been touched deeply by Jack and Connie Pelter'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.

Annunciation Leogane and the 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.

Visiting Haiti with Youth

The number of people who have gone on Mission Haiti's big yearly trips has grown dramatically and wonderfully, from a handful six years ago, to I believe some 50 people now crossing paths and sharing and experiencing over a one to three week journey.

This year four teenagers and one young college student ranging in age from 13 to 20 years joined the trip. And they were awesome! They brought the miracle of their youth, and were hard working, flexible, creative, energetic, open minded, open hearted, open armed, and open handed — awe inspiring. They gave of themselves 110%. And I dare say, somewhere in their being, they will never be the same.

I observed these young people changing diapers and crib sheets, playing soccer with toddlers, swinging an infant to sleep, singing reggae and lullabies, teaching kids the wonder of an iPhone; there was no stopping their enthusiasm and interaction, as well as their observations and reflections. I will never forget one young man whistling a soft tune to a baby or accompanying the DJs in the sound booth in Citi Soleil's radio station. I will never forget another walking beside me in the slums; "Most people will never know or see what I have," he said in disbelief, new awareness, and in gratitude.

And you have not lived, really, until you've witnessed these young men, artfully painting women's toenails and massaging legs with lotion at the **Village of Jesus** and at a clinic and hospital for TB and AIDs patients.

These young people are a reflection of your love here, your community, and the love of their parents, families, and neighbors. In their youth, they met Haiti as their own — as neighbors, friends, and family.

They also offered we "older folk" great joy, including spontaneity like synchronized swimming lessons in an old rusty pool at night under the stars, one of the amenities of the guest house we stayed at for five nights!



Haiti's Hardships and Hope for the Future

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 has been cut off by various funding sources and the cost of food is rising, and simply put, starvation is an even greater problem now that it has ever been. The staff of Annunciation Leogane 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 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.

This brings me back to your school in Leogane and **Bethleem Farm**! Yes, the growing, green, phenomenal farm on the land of Bethlehem Convent, the home of the Sisters of the Companions of Jesus. 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.



You built the wall around these acres and yes, it needs repair from the last big storms and from Sandy. If there is a hope for Haiti's future, it is in agriculture. You are making sure Annunciation Leogane 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 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, and 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, and things that make life truly worth living and not merely about struggling for survival.

One of my last days in Haiti I helped out at a wound clinic, open to all until the last person was seen. I held up a young woman's leg so the stump of where it had been amputated just nine days before could be cleaned and re-wrapped. She had come on crutches who knows how far to be seen, and was in pain and sad.

She covered her eyes from the hurt and the tears. I tried to comfort her, to reassure her that it was healing. She took her hand off her eyes, smiled, and tapped three times the large cross on her chest. We didn't need to know each other's language or any words at all. And here, once again, "I met Christ."

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 Leogane, the women in the Village of Jesus, the Sisters of the Companions of Jesus, 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 divine 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.