

*"I don't think I can ever be the same after being there."*

--Gina Norquist

Haiti is a land of contrasts. Outside the terminal of the Port-au-Prince airport is a dreary tableau: gray cinderblock walls topped with coiled razor wire. Cars clothed in tan dust. Parking lots paved in broken macadam, the streets in crumbling asphalt. Red and black graffiti scrawled across buildings. Litter and debris piled in the gutters.

There's a lot about Haiti that isn't nice. And yet, there's a lot that is. When you're nearly undone by the oppressive heat, you catch a sweet, cooling breeze. When you feel overrun by the mobs of merchants lining the curbs – babysitting baskets, wheelbarrows, carts loaded with soaps, shampoos, soft drinks, shoes, mangos, avocados, plantains, pineapples, auto parts – you notice how adorable the children are. And when you think you can't stand another second of the van's teeth-rattling, bone-jarring maneuvering over rutted, rock-strewn roads, you hit a stretch of wide, smooth pavement.

And should you tire of the endless flat, dusty plains sprouting spiny, tired brush, you look up and see green hills reaching for the skies.

Abject poverty and stunning wealth. Corrugated metal huts and elegant mountain manses. Unclean water and Caribbean views. This is Haiti.

Haiti is one of the most densely populated countries in the world, and one of the poorest. Goats, pigs, roosters and cows roam parched riverbeds, feeding on garbage, and the people are hungry. The local grocery store sells microwave dinners, but most residents cook outside their huts on charcoal-powered stoves. For the average Haitian, little is convenient.

Government officials pay scant attention to the country's infrastructure, education and health care systems, and laws. Electricity turns off and on at will, and the roads – even in the cities – are treacherous at any speed. Just when you wonder how the government could possibly do *less* for its people, you learn about the missions that come to Haiti to set up medical clinics, build schools and establish orphanages.

One of those missions is the Village of Hope, Haiti, where seven of us worked the last week in August. Bill and Debbie Larson organized our team, which included teacher Gena Norquist, former school administrator Joan Ulvog, French immersion teacher Ashley Davies from Vienna Presbyterian Church, and me, a French speaker. We traveled to Haiti to conduct a three-day professional development workshop for teachers at the Village of Hope School. Joining us was Kathy Adams, a retired educator and Presbyterian minister from Perryville, Ohio.



Bert and Roberta Anderson of western New York State are the resident directors of Village of Hope, Haiti. They live on the grounds of Hope House, a plain but welcoming guest house for visiting mission workers in Croix-des-Bouquets, a Port-au-Prince suburb. The Andersons oversee the school and health center in rural Ganthiers, about 45 minutes away. Roberta also supervises the household staff while Bert manages the compound and, in their “spare” time, they escort mission workers to and fro.



At the request of VOH principal Clovis Elias, our team set out to share with his faculty our understanding of learning styles – auditory, visual and kinesthetic – so teachers might find new ways to connect with their students. Clovis also asked that we introduce U.S.-style manipulatives, to give his students hands-on ways to learn math concepts, like patterns, addition, subtraction and fractions. Into 10 donated suitcases we stuffed interlocking Unifix Cubes, dice, playing cards, colorful beads and small plastic animals, along with standard school supplies and teacher resources, and hauled it all to Haiti.

Our days at the school – Aug. 25, 26 and 27 – began at 8:30 a.m. with an opening session in the breezy open-air chapel. Assisted by a Haitian translator, Gena or her teacher volunteers would lead the group in a devotion and a song. Gena then might introduce a game before discussing of one of the learning styles.

About 9 a.m. teachers separated into groups – preschool through first grade, second through sixth, and secondary – and headed to classrooms. Joan and I taught in a bare-bones room, furnished with rudimentary tables and benches, a scuffed-up teacher’s desk and a sagging bookcase. The chalkboard was nothing more than green-painted plywood nailed to the wall. Pretty frequently, wind gusting through the unscreened windows sent chalk, construction paper, lesson plans and markers flying all over.

We broke for lunch in the school cafeteria between 11 and 11:30 a.m. We sat with the teachers and ate what they ate: a plate of rice and beans, maybe a bite or two of fish, topped with a thin sauce. The same lunch is served every day throughout the school year, and for most students, it’s their only reliable meal.

We resumed instruction in the afternoons, wrapping up about 1:30 p.m. for a half-hour closing in the chapel. By then we were all hot, sweaty and tired, ready for a shower back at Hope House. Even though the work was demanding, the teachers’ spirited response was contagious. Our team was overjoyed at how engaged and enthusiastic the teachers were and how much we grew to care about them.

“This was the highest level of energy I have seen in all the activities in which I’ve participated down here,” Bill said at week’s end.

We also had great fun with the translators who worked with us, translating lessons from English to French to Creole and back again. Lead translator Pierre was a delightful middle-age man with a happy sense of humor. The other four – Losmane, Pierrot, Benson and Chéry – were newly out of college, looking to build their futures. They rode back and forth to school with us, enlivening the long, bumpy ride with their playful teasing.

Our work didn't end with the third day. At Clovis' request, we returned a fourth morning to answer teacher questions. He'd asked teachers to submit questions in writing; seven responded, but the entire elementary staff showed up. Their questions were all over the landscape. One or two pertained to the three learning styles, but the others raised topics such as classroom management, keeping students awake and alert, and teaching pre-reading skills. Thanks to extra materials we'd brought from the States – workbooks, children's books and teaching resources, all in French – our team could alleviate concerns with specific suggestions and take-home information. The Haitians were eager for answers, looking for better ways to help their students.



So here was another contrast: miserable surroundings vis-à-vis remarkable people.

Our first morning in Croix-des-Bouquets, our group attended a church service in a humble building with rough pews. We were seated upfront, facing the congregation. As each worship leader rose to the pulpit, he or she praised God with a voice rising in emotion, shouting over and over the Creole words, "Mesi, Seigneur!" *Thank you, God!* In emphatic tones, each more passionate than the last, pastors and laity alike enumerated the many, many things for which they were thankful. You didn't have to speak the language to understand that these people believed God had truly blessed them.

I was awestruck in the face of such joy, but also ashamed. How many Sundays do I come to church, feeling not at all thankful?

Now I know how thankful I am. I am thankful that I was able to go to Haiti and witness the vibrant community there. I am thankful that those loving people accepted me into their midst for a few days. I am thankful that I can count those magnificent souls as friends.

Mesi, Seigneur! And Mesi, Haiti!