

Our Visit To Haiti

Thanksgiving Week, 2008

By Mrs. Lynn Kearney

The campus has lovely palms and huge variations of our houseplants, but in the background are brown mountains—a wasteland denuded during colonial times and the Duvalier years. Because of poverty, reforestation has never worked. On campus, there are lovely yellow and concrete buildings with interesting tile floors and staircases—gardens for a little food and respite—some tropical flowers blooming. The school and dormitories are walled in (security guards 24/7). Outside the walls you might run into UN troops with machine guns.

The students, seventh through 13th grades, are all small—not a one in three hundred is chubby or obese—some have rather large heads and yellowish tinges to the whites of their eyes, another mark of malnutrition. Nevertheless, they have a great sense of humor and are hopeful and perky—just delightful.

I taught a lesson on Walt Whitman and Paul Lawrence Dunbar to three classes. They were in their last year and are conversant in Creole (of course), French, Spanish and English. Back to Walt Whitman...these students, with a slight assist regarding the vocabulary, understood and appreciated Whitman as much as any students I have taught. They loved the lyricism of Dunbar. Although, they come from the worst slum in Port Au Prince, they are the elite in terms of education. Their education, paid for by the US Haitian Project, is free; however, they must commit to staying in Haiti and working for progress. Administrators are currently trying to figure out how to enable more to attend a university—perhaps BI will try to establish an endowment.

We (the adults) visited a hospital/orphanage run by the Sisters of Charity. My first reaction was tears—iron cribs filled with children (300 or so) whom I would have guessed to be babies, but they were mostly malnourished sick toddlers. There was a chorus of crying right before snack time and lunch, so the wailing was somewhat about food. But they stopped immediately if they were picked up. That's why visitors are welcome—to come and pick up the babies, which the cheerful but stretched staff cannot do enough. A baby is lucky to be held once a day. When we arrived, the babies were fresh and clean; there was not the slightest odor in a room of 25—40 babies. Even the diaper pails had no odor—they must have been emptied and rinsed constantly. Outside I think I saw miles of laundry hanging on lines. One little boy, James, refused to let me put him down, so I walked around with him and visited other babies. In the end, inexplicably, I was uplifted, though totally humbled, by this experience.

We, students and chaperones, stayed in a house across from the school. The house—great design—could use some repairs, and the plumbing is challenging and offers only cold water, but other than that, better than what I grew up in. Using the bathroom took planning. Besides the challenging plumbing and interruptions in the flow of water, there were eleven of us in the house! We slept in bunks decked out in mosquito netting; I had to talk myself out of having an attack of claustrophobia.

The problem in Haiti in my mind is food—maybe because I am a mom with a big interest in nutrition. The kids diet is generally spinach and corn (for breakfast), rice and beans every day, meat once a week, eggs once a week juice once a week and some kind of powdered potatoes every evening for dinner. At the school the kids are lucky to have clean water and the ability to shower daily. They wear attractive uniforms which are very tidy—though they must wash them (one uniform per child). They dry them on the shrubs on the campus.

Our days were 5:30 AM to 6:00 PM. The wonderful girls I traveled with did manual labor in the morning—spreading and turning compost (full of maggots), sifting the ashes from the incinerator (my worst experience while there) and weeding a playground. The first day, a rat ran out of the compost. One asked, “Was that a rat?” I reluctantly affirmed her suspicions. They kept right on working.

The great religions teach that God loves the poor. I guess I have always thought only in terms of God wanting those who can to do something about the evils of poverty. Now I think that there is another dimension. The poor are authentic people who, in their humility and ability to live in the present, are incredibly lovable. How else can I explain that my time in Haiti, impoverished and prone to violence, was joyous?