

The Haiti Experience by Mary Michael Levitt

The boy in the children's hospital tent was only 12 years old. I couldn't speak his language. I didn't even know his name. He was critically injured: in a split second both his legs and one arm had been mangled by falling debris as a 7.0 magnitude earthquake decimated Haiti on January 12, 2010. He was the only child in his family to survive. As I walked by, he held out his hand - the one limb not injured - welcoming me to join him in the evening prayer service. All around us, the families of the injured children were singing and praying in their native Creole. Tucking his hand into mine, I sat down beside this little boy with the radiant smile, marveling at the prayerful voices rising intensely in the evening air. Eventually the boy's eyes began to close. His voice faded. Silently, still clinging to my hand, he continued to mouth the words. He was praying in his sleep.

I reached down and gently pulled the covers up, glad that sleep would help him block out his pain, at least for a few hours. When the service ended, survivors and volunteers extended their arms to each other, embracing in a ritual of gratitude and acknowledgment. These body-to-body hugs generated physical and spiritual warmth meant to comfort, if only for a moment, the despair of their lives. No, of all our lives! For we volunteers had become part of Haiti, too, absorbing Haitian grief and generating Haitian hope.

Now when I arrived at the children's tent they recognized me and called out Mary, Mary, sometimes clapping in appreciation. We formed a bond and for the rest of my stay I eagerly attended each evening prayer service. One night I led the tent residents in a resounding rendition of the song Amen, we even danced in the aisles. Finding a song we could all sing together in a common language was engaging. Their faith seemed unshakeable; their voices magnificent; their joy in life unexplainable. Their spirit was contagious - listening to those resilient voices uplifted in song, it was easy to forget that we were in the midst of a disaster scene. I could push that reality aside in the glory of the sacred moment.

I had flown to Haiti, some 1,500 miles from my New Jersey home, in February of 2010, as a volunteer with the New Jersey-based Foundation for Peace. As a mental health disaster specialist trained by the American Red Cross and the NJ Mental Health Association, I was eager to put my hard-earned knowledge into action in one of the worst disasters the world has ever seen. The televised images of twisted bodies pulled from piles of rubble; mass graves and anguished faces of survivors with hands lifted high in the air, desperate for help in finding their loved ones haunted me. I studied photographs of flattened buildings, knowing human beings were buried under the heavy, pancaked floors and collapsed beams. The images of lost and injured children were the ones that broke my heart.

I wanted to help ease their pain. I had no idea that in my three trips to Haiti, it would end up being the other way around - their contagious smiles, patience and gratitude in the face of loss, laughter in spite of their pain, and their unconditional acceptance of the volunteers as part of their extended family offered me an inspiring example of the human resolve to survive and thrive.

Witnessing the Haitian people's response to catastrophe stirred me to contemplate deeply the true meaning of life, the essential nature of family, and the awesome power of hope and prayer.

Earth-shattering Devastation

Haiti, located on the Caribbean island of Hispaniola, is no stranger to catastrophe. It's long history includes winning their freedom through revolution, political instability, rampant poverty, and natural disasters - the August 2008 hurricane season alone wiped out most of the country's food crops, damaged irrigation systems, and left up to a million people homeless and starving. But January's earthquake was far more catastrophic.

The fault was very shallow, centered just 6.2 miles below the earth's surface, with a magnitude that made it one of the most powerful on record. The first shock hit in the afternoon, centered just 10 miles outside Haiti's capital city of Port Au Prince, killing more than 200,000 people, injuring millions, and leaving 1.3 million homeless. Dozens of aftershocks ensured almost total destruction of the city and its infrastructure, destroying or damaging, 300,000 homes, 3,000 schools, and hundreds of government facilities, including the Presidential palace. The airport was damaged stalling immediate access for rescue workers and supplies. The only other way into the disaster area was through Haiti's relatively unscathed neighbor, the Dominican Republic, which reluctantly agreed to open its shared border to refugees and rescue workers alike.

Within moments of seeing the unfolding crisis, global aid groups from around the world leapt into action, including three island-based staff members of Foundation for Peace: Kristen, Luke and Leah. They felt the tremors while sitting in their home office in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, a six hour drive from Port Au Prince. They knew it was bad and they had to help.

They contacted Dr. Ken Culver, Director of Foundation for Peace (FFP) at the NJ headquarters and made immediate arrangements to travel to the Haiti with supplies. Back in NJ Dr. Culver quickly began to organize a stream of aid and volunteers directly to Haiti. Word spread quickly through the internet that FFP aid groups were organizing to travel to Haiti. That's where I came in. I had simply emailed a friend in FFP with concern for her and asked, "Is there anything I can do?" She said, "Do you want to go to Haiti." I immediately replied, "Yes." On February 21, just over a month after the earthquake, I left New Jersey for the first of my three trips to Haiti.

One problem at disaster scenes is that many well-meaning people show up with no means to take care of themselves, winding up more of a burden than a help. Volunteers who want to help are better off going through an experienced NGO like Foundation For Peace, which knows how to provide adequate security, travel arrangements, housing, bottled water, food, and even their own cooks.

Good Samaritans

After a four hour flight from Newark, 25 of us landed in Santo Domingo, stayed the night in the FFP home/school and left the next day. The usual five hour trip to the border took us nearly nine hours, by school bus which broke down three times. Thank God for duct tape!

We finally arrived at the Good Samaritan Hospital in Jimani, a small dusty town on the Dominican Republic side of the Haiti border. We settled in at the nearby home of Dr. Marc Pinard, sleeping on the floor on mattress transported by FFP from Santo Domingo.

The scene in Jimani was inspiring. After the earthquake, Good Samaritan Hospital had become a gateway for relief efforts, and a safe haven for some six thousand Haitians who streamed over the border to find help and medical treatment. Twelve countries sent roughly 900 volunteers— including many medical teams —These dedicated people performed 800 life-saving surgeries and amputations, some of them before medication arrived. Foundation For Peace also sent doctors and nurses who worked long shifts caring for the critically injured in hastily-erected hospital tents. Their work was exhausting, never ending, with little or no comfort. They were totally focused on saving lives, restoring hope, and reuniting families. They epitomized what the term Good Samaritan really meant.

The rescue situation was tenuous from the beginning, entirely dependent on the good will of the Dominican Republic's government, which opened their borders and airports to rescue workers and cargo shipments passing into

Port Au Prince, and allowing Haitian refugees to seek help in Jimani. As the roads overflowed with a steady stream of pedestrians and truck convoys, everyone wondered how long that “good will” would last.

One of those early refugees was Michael Valentin, now hired as Director of Haitian Mission Projects for FFP. As a lawyer, pastor, and professor, Valentin lived and worked in Port Au Prince. He is fluent in Creole, French, Spanish and English. When the earthquake struck and his teenage daughter was injured, his family sought critical medical treatment at Good Samaritan Hospital. Once there, he began working with the FFP volunteer teams. I would learn a great deal from this man about Haitian culture and resilience.

“The Haitian people are all about relationships,” Valentin explained. Family is the nucleus of Haitian society. Within that society, individuals depend upon each other for survival and for spiritual nourishment. Haitians have great respect for life experience, unlike American society, where status is heavily weighted toward celebrity, youth, and material success. Haitian children consider it a privilege to help take care of the elderly, who are highly respected for their wisdom that comes from life experience.

Valentin believes that when faced with a disaster of this proportion, where survival of large populations is in question, cohesive family relationships can save a country from falling apart. He also said that “Americans came down to save the Haitians, and the Haitians end up saving Americans.” I would soon come to see the truth of both those statements.

Building a latrine

The days following the earthquake continued to help me define what a Good Samaritan truly is: those who stop to help in any given situation, no questions asked, no repayment demanded. Foundation For Peace volunteers have the reputation of doing what is asked, rather than impose what they think others need. On the Haitian side of the border, sanitation was the pressing need for the 1,700 residents of the tent city now called Camp Hope, situated on the 60-acre site of the Love A Child Orphanage in Fond Parisien, about 30 miles east of Port Au Prince. I volunteered to help build 25-foot deep latrines, which we hoped to complete before our week was finished. Our only tools were picks, shovels, rakes and buckets, and the hands and hearts of the USA Haitian community. We picked at the ground until the dirt was loosened, shoveled dirt into buckets, and formed a human dirt disposal chain to throw the dirt aside, while others raked the dirt smooth and even. A second group built the wooden frame to cover the hole for privacy. It was back-breaking, slow work in 95-100 degree heat.— But the Haitian children lightened our task; they played, burst into song, laughed at our attempts at speaking Creole, and even offered to help dig. Their favorite activity was “Photo! Photo!” They struck delightful poses, then ran to peek at the digital camera screen, covering their faces, giggling, and pointing to themselves in delight. Their laughter was infectious. Under the blazing hot sun, we made many new friends, and actually had fun despite the hard work. We could see that Camp Hope’s residents had a high percentage of injured people living in the tents by the number of walkers, crutches, and wheelchairs that lined the path ways. A private latrine was a true gift.

Losing It

The days flew by and each day brought unpredictable experiences. One night I eagerly agreed to help one of the nurses distribute donated shoes to the families in the children’s hospital tent. As we carried the huge bag over to the tent, the nurse was called away by a doctor. “You go ahead and give them out,” she said, “while I see what he wants.” Okay, I thought, I know how to do this. Setting up the bag in the center of the tent, I motioned to some of the mothers camped out on the floor next to their child’s hospital bed. In a flash, I was overcome with requests for sizes. But the shoes were a jumble, unmarked and unsorted. Before I could figure out what to do, someone grabbed a pair of shoes from my hands. I knew I was in trouble. In less than a minute, I was surrounded, and the shoes were gone. Desperate

mothers began to fight among themselves, grabbing shoes from one another, hiding them in the only space they could lay claim to, under the bed where they stored their meager possessions. Not speaking Creole, I couldn't get their attention. The noise escalated. All I could do was walk away in tears. Mothers who had been out on errands returned to find out they had missed out on shoes. They were frustrated and hurt. The situation deteriorated into the only distressing episode I had witnessed. Luckily, Ed Michel, a Haitian-American from our volunteer group, heard the commotion and came to investigate. After cautioning me he entered the tent to speak to the women. "Look at you, how you are acting!" he boomed at them in Creole. "Calm down and get back to your area." Immediately the women calmed down and listened to Ed. The Haitian culture is still a machismo society.

Lest we judge the Haitian women, let's remember the black Friday episode at Wal-Mart when the employee opening the door at 5 am was trampled to death by the customers.

This incident taught me a lot about the downside of just "plunging in" without thinking a procedure through. It would have been easy to blame the mothers, but I was the one who had created a situation pitting mothers against one another for a limited supply of goods. My confidence had been shaken, but I absorbed the lesson, determined to get it right the next time.

But alas my lessons were not over. Later that week, a new nurse in the children's tent found out I had mental health experience and came to me with great relief. "I am so glad you're here, we really need you in the children's tent," she said. "The mothers are losing it." I swelled up with anticipation of doing good work – family therapy was my area of expertise – and I followed her to see which mothers she felt were "losing it." I know that feeling when you are so overwhelmed, you just want to scream. I had so much empathy for these women, and was chomping at the bit to help. Later that evening, I saw a woman standing over her child, angrily giving him a piece of her mind, with a slap for good measure. The injured child was sobbing. I slowly walked over, made eye contact with the mom, and sat down on the bed next to the sobbing child. Since his injuries forced him to lie on his stomach, I simply rubbed his back. Oddly, his mother turned her back to me. Soon, he started to relax and his cries slowed down. I turned and put a hand on the mothers shoulder, attempting to make contact with her. She looked away. In that moment it hit me: She was ashamed of herself and how she lost it. I stayed a few more minutes. "You ok?" I finally asked. The mother nodded and I moved away to see if I could be of use in another location.

Feeling as if I had really helped this time, I recounted my experience to one of our Haitian American group members. To my surprise, she said, "No, Mary-Michael, you got it all wrong!" In Haitian culture the mother must be respected at all times. A child is not permitted to talk back for any reason at any time. This child talked back to her and I had interfered with her discipline, and took her position away. "It doesn't matter that the child is ill and in pain, he must still follow the mother's commands," she told me. "She was not ashamed of her behavior. She was mad at you for interfering."

Thankfully those were the most vital lessons. It was not all this way. After two days of building latrines, I was reassigned to the Hospital grounds to help with patients. I noticed the entire porch of the hospital was stacked with literally hundreds of boxes of medical supplies, some that had been opened in haste and thrown back on the pile. It was a complete and utter mess. I saw a need and filled it. In two days all those boxes were repacked, dated and labeled and transported to a secure location in the hospital.

Help is a tricky thing.

There is a fine line between confidence and arrogance. Rushing in to help people without a plan or knowledge of their culture and social rules can turn help into a hindrance, or possibly start a small riot. Despite all my training, there was still so much to know about helping disaster victims, especially across the boundaries of language and culture.

Awe-inspiring experiences were happening everywhere. If I had despaired of whether people could really survive such whole-scale devastation, or how much of a difference volunteers could really make, the answer was all around me. What might have been a scene of degradation and despair was turned into one of soaring hope and humanity, because of the good will and tremendous fortitude of the Haitian people and those who had volunteered to help them. One time, on a break from the brutal work of digging latrines in the hot sun, I crossed paths with a girl of about 7. We had never met, but she looked right up at me, smiled, and offered me one of her crackers. I can't tell you how that felt. She had lost so much, yet was willing to give away what she had to a stranger. I was speechless. If I declined, would she feel badly? If I accepted, I might be taking away her lunch. As I was also out of hand sanitizer, I opted to decline graciously. She scooted away, cheerfully munching her cracker.

Another night, I sat by a mother who had lost five children. Praying loudly, sitting on the flimsy hospital bed next to her one remaining child, this woman lifted her arms in the air. Her voice was strong, rising more powerful than any other as she sang praises to her Lord. Her grief was unimaginable, but her faith was unshakable. I truly believe I was changed forever in that moment, although I still don't quite understand the emotions I felt. These experiences were as earth shaking as the earthquake itself.

But it wasn't just the Haitians that were teaching me how to live – I learned so much from my fellow volunteers, who showed amazing solidarity across international boundaries, finding ways to overcome language barriers, extreme fatigue, community living, rice and beans diet, political upheaval, and continuous changes in command and decision making as relief teams came and went over the weeks following the quake. They were indefatigable, and generous with their time and material possessions.

One night, the temperatures dropped. The wind blew hard, flapping tarps that scared the shivering children. Blankets were scarce. I went on a hunt for bed covers and came upon a doctor. Did he know where I could find blankets for the children? He said, "Wait, I will get you my sleeping bag." I warned him that he wouldn't get it back. He hurried away saying, "Don't worry, I'll find something else." Not likely I thought, not here. When he returned, I rushed back to the children's tent with the sleeping bag. It was only as I unzipped it for a shivering child that I noticed the brand: top of the line LL Bean.

Deeply moved by the fact that the Haitians had lost everything important to them, we had all suspended our comfortable lives to help a third world country. We brushed out teeth and drank water from bottles only, waited patiently at the end of the day for our turn for even a cold trickle of water to rinse off the day's dirt. I quickly learned to think about every luxury I took for granted back home – not flushing toilet paper into the overstressed pipes, making the best of the bi-gender dorm rooms with snoring and constant noise as shifts began and ended. Privacy was impossible, but who were we to complain? All around us the Haitian people were living in worse situations, many unable to walk to the latrine or even sit up to eat by themselves.

Upheaval

Harder to overcome and understand was the long-standing political conflict between the Haitians and Dominicans, suspended only because of the earthquake. The Dominican government suddenly announced that all Haitian patients and their families had to leave the fully functioning Good Samaritan Hospital immediately. It seemed cruel and unfair to us! We had worked so hard to provide quality medical treatment – now we had to uproot them and

send them back to what was still a disaster zone. I was assigned to help organize the patient transports. Working side by side with Good Samaritan Hospital nurses and staff, I witnessed how terribly painful it was for them to say goodbye. Emotionally attached to their suffering patients, they were upset that these patients were being discharged prematurely to uncertain medical treatment in the refugee camps across the border. I tried to make sense of this. I asked Kristen our FFP team leader what shall I tell people when I go home, how can I explain this? She replied "Well think of it this way. If the earthquake took place in Mexico and six thousand victims flooded our borders and American hospitals what would we have done to help them?"

In the middle of the insanity, all I could do was offer water, a listening ear, a shoulder, and a marker. Yes, the Haitians who had already lost everything were understandably afraid of losing the only possessions they had managed to salvage. As the air crackled with unspoken tension, I found a way to help. Stealing as many garbage bags as I could find, we started to pack their belongings. With duct tape I marked each bag with their names. Grateful Haitians waved me over to their bed side so I could mark their crutches, walkers, bags and wheelchairs. Relocating is stressful enough under normal conditions. Going back into a disaster area to take up residence in crowded tents while mastering the art of moving in casts, or with missing limbs, all with the prospect of the Haiti rainy season fast approaching, was unimaginable.

Trusting in the Process

Our Foundation For Peace group had been scheduled to return to Santo Domingo on Friday, February 26. But on their way across the border to finish up the latrine building for Camp Hope, they were turned back by border police. They decided to leave for Santo Domingo several hours earlier than planned.

I was caught up in the frenzy of organizing patients and their belongings. How could I leave? Impulsively, I tapped Luke, FFP's designated organizer of the disaster site, on the shoulder. "If you need more help I will stay." Luke immediately placed a call to Dr. Culver in New Jersey headquarters to ask permission. Culver enthusiastically agreed. I started back to the tent when it suddenly hit me: I was on my own now. I didn't know how I would get back to Santo Domingo, where I would stay, or what I would eat. But this time, I knew it was the right thing to do. I just trusted the process and went back to work.

I ended up staying five extra days, in one of the tensest situations of my stay. Each day, we crossed the border, transporting families crowded into the back of Daihatsu flat bed trucks. Patients rode in cramped ambulances. We drove past Dominican border soldiers, who looked far too young to be wielding AK-47 weapons. Luckily, there were no incidents.

By March 3, 2010, the last of the Good Samaritan patients and families were relocated across the border in their native Haiti. Discharged patients and families were first sent to Camp Love A Child for medical triage, then moved again to live at Camp Hope in Fond Parisian, where we had dug the latrine. It was roughly 30 miles from Port Au Prince. All the residents had at least one family member who was injured in the quake.

It was time for the volunteers to leave, but none of us wanted to go home. "I will be back" was the continuous, resounding promise we gave ourselves. The dust had settled, tents were taken down, and the quiet was so very sad. Our fears for our patients' continued safety was in each of our hearts. As the hospital closed, the truth is that the volunteers found their own personal solace in carrying the spirit of the Haitian people back home with them. We knew that our efforts had changed both sets of lives forever.

Coming home

For days after returning home, my thoughts often returned to Haiti. I found comfort in the NGO face-book pages and internet debriefing sites. I had always been interested in the weather channel; now I watched it daily worrying about the people I had left behind, hoping their tent cities would survive the coming rainy season and then the hurricane season. I heard the sad news about Dr. Marc Pinard age 62, who had opened his home to us – he died of a massive heart attack on April 15, 2010, another victim of the earthquake disaster in my mind. There was no nightly prayer service with uplifted voices to help me mourn his passing. As I followed the unfolding situation in Haiti through newspapers, chat rooms and over the websites of FFP and other NGOs, I realized the immense work that still needed to be met in healing Haiti. I scheduled a second trip to Haiti in May 2010 landing in Port au Prince and getting another taste of the enduring disaster.

This time I embarked on a whirlwind five day cross country Foundation For Peace leadership summit with Director Dr. Culver, Associate Director Wendy Patchin and Pastor Michael Valentin. Over those five amazing days we met with Haitian mayors, pastors, school directors and the American Refugee Director of Camp Hope Tent city. We visited and assessed FFP projects built before and after the earthquake, which included water treatment centers, schools, housing, churches, and gardens. The excitement grew as plans were formulated to begin the construction of a vocational school, housing for volunteers, and a second water treatment center and, of course, a soccer field on a new five acre plots of recently acquired land.

It was exhilarating to be right in the thick of the work, planning for a new Haiti. The Foundation for Peace moves fast and gets things done; an amazing feat when you realize that each meeting needs to be explained and translated into English, Creole, Spanish, and sometimes French. At times, it was also scary – especially when we had to travel to certain sites accessible only by narrow, dirt roads over mountainous terrain by pick-up truck. Once, as we crawled over a deeply rutted road, leaning precariously between boulders on one side and a sheer drop-off on the other, I said please let me out. “I can walk faster than this truck is moving.” Sure enough, the truck had trouble keeping up with me.

Excited about the prospects of carrying through on these ground breaking projects I signed up for a third trip in July, and returned to Haiti with a diverse group of thirty Foundation For Peace volunteers. They hailed from five states, ranged in age from sixteen to sixty-plus, and represented many different religions and professions: electricians, students, teachers, doctors, and even an athletic director. Once again, our goal was to serve wherever we were needed.

At the Port au Prince airport we were treated to seats in an authentic Haitian “tap tap” bus, a multi-colored vehicle covered top to bottom with neon-colored scripture quotes, statements of faith – “Thank You Jesus” was emblazoned across the top – and a full painting of American basketball star Michael Jordan and his five championship rings. Our baggage was tossed onto the bus roof, Haitian style, and we climbed inside the open entrance – no door to keep the passengers from falling out! Inside were rows of pine seats, and slats instead of windows. Feeling a bit claustrophobic, I grabbed the front seat with the driver for a view – but watching vehicles jostling for space, careening in and out of the chaotic city traffic was even more unnerving. In the distance, thunderclouds were massing. Concerned for our luggage on the roof, we all prayed the oncoming rain storm would hold off until we reached the safety of our lodging, the Love and Peace Hotel in Fond Parisien, Haiti, forgetting the Haitian people living in tents have to try and dry out their meager belongings every time it drizzled.

After unpacking, we took some time to get to know each other, then hit the ground running. First, we painted a new school building inside and out at Camp Hope, then spent several days breaking ground for the new vocational

school. We all talked about how education will be the key to rebuilding Haiti. 72% of the population has only a primary-school education but at each school we visited children in sparkling clean white shirts sat shoulder to shoulder for hours in dripping wet heat eager to learn. It was exciting for me to work on these two projects, which I had helped to plan on my previous trip. Again, we used picks, shovels, buckets and rakes and tried to stay hydrated in the hot summer sun.

The most emotional project was one arranged by Professor Valentin, who sent us to a remote village to set up a medical clinic that served 170 families. While ten Haitian doctors provided medical assessments for patients, we ran the pharmacy. The line formed early, with patients showing up hours before their appointment to sit in the hot sun. Most had no water or food with them. We begged them to stay home until their scheduled time, to no avail. It turned out, they were afraid to miss their appointment, knowing that they had only this one day to see a doctor.

Several of the volunteers broke out the bubbles and soccer balls we had brought to connect with the children. Soon the atmosphere changed from desperation to a party, with the children providing the entertainment. The hours sped by, as we made sure that every family got their examination and proper medication. Only an approaching rain storm reminded us that if we didn't leave before the rains came, we'd be stranded there when the roads became impassable.

Back at the hotel knowing our time in Haiti was limited, we worked well into each night, participating in debriefing meetings, preparing kits for the Camp Hope's Bible School coloring and angel-making activities, organizing 300 pounds of school and personal supplies to be evenly distributed to the camp, and accepting several invitations to attend formal church services. This trip I was asked to be a small group debriefer, finally getting to use some of my disaster relief training. These meetings were profoundly meaningful as we digested each person's daily experience.

But we did take time to socialize with the Haitian people and get to know their country. We took a drive-through tour of Port Au Prince, another day we visited a beach for a late afternoon, and on Sunday, we took part in a Haiti/USA soccer game. In a high state of excitement and dread, we selected captains, drew up team rosters, and put a game plan together. We dreaded "getting our butts kicked" by the serious Haitians, who take great pride in their national sport. Game time arrived. The Haitian team began individual drills, showing amazing ball control, "Oh boy, we're goner's!" we moaned. Haitians were used to playing on rocky, compacted dirt playing fields, not the cushioned, grassy fields of America. Even our ace player, Lee Milas, was intimidated. The game began and the crowd grew as each player fought hard for position on the field. Our athletic Haitian security guard played goalie for the US team – was that cheating? Well maybe a little, but in the end it didn't help. We lost 7-4 but there were no hard feelings. The after-game group photo of smiling Haitian and American soccer players spoke volumes about good sportsmanship.

All too soon, our departure date approached. We were all sad to be leaving. There is a certain feeling you get when you wake up every day and know that what you are doing is making a significant difference. And at the end of the day, there is nothing as satisfying as going to bed with a fatigue that only comes from meaningful work. To give back, to help, to restore hope is life affirming work. The truth of that can still be seen on the volunteer and NGO Facebook pages, where the steady chatter of internet debriefing still goes on every day. Volunteers are making plans to use their vacation time to return. Again and again, the infectious spirit of the Haitian people inspires volunteers to continue.

Michael Valentin words still inspire me: "Americans came down to save the Haitians and the Haitians end up saving the Americans." Haiti is a small county with a huge heart, a vulnerable people dependent on aid but proud and

strong. We recently asked the Director of Camp Hope have there been any incidents of crime at the camp? He replied "No, not one." Amazing, here in America when the gas recently exploded in the California neighborhood (Sept. 2010), some residents came home ecstatic that their home were spared from the fire only to discover they had been robbed. We Americans are still learning all kinds of political, disaster relief and cultural lessons from Hurricane Katrina that will take years to process. By going to Haiti I put myself into a totally new experience to stretch who I am. In the process I became more humble, questioned my faith in new ways, and deepened the meaning of my life. Viktor Frankl's states in his 1946 book *Man's Search for Meaning* "We can discover this meaning in life in three different ways: (1) by creating a work or doing a deed; (2) by experiencing something or encountering someone; and (3) by the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering."

I know I'll be back. I hope that more Americans will offer their help, not only in Haiti but in their own backyard as well. I believe that helping others to rebuild whether in Haiti or at home is a tangible antidote to a world of callous indifference. I have seen how generosity of spirit, put into meaningful action, helped to heal one small corner of the world. The choice is ours. Heal thyself.