

Haiti Reflection – Monica Remillard

It was an experience of a lifetime. I cannot stop thanking God for giving my dad and me the opportunity to participate in such a mission. Not only were we fortunate enough to help the people suffering in Port Au Prince, Haiti; but, we met an incredible group of the most compassionate, caring, and generous people. We joined a Physician, Nurse Practitioner, Physician's Assistant, Pharmacist, Deacon, Registered Nurse, and some "muscle" in Doylestown, Pennsylvania. As a group, we represented 5 churches. Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Pennsylvania was the most represented. Some of the missionaries were making their 3rd-4th trip to Port Au Prince; one was making her third trip in one year. To devote such an immense amount of time, money, and energy into caring for the less fortunate is such an admirable trait.

"Culture shock" is such a cliché and mediocre way to describe what we saw on our drive from the airport to Father Andrew's compound. The roads, which are a combination of minimal asphalt and primarily dirt and rocks, were lined on either side with trash, pigs, dogs, roosters and locals selling whatever they could to make a living (anything from clothes and paintings to charcoal and sugarcane). "It was like driving through level 12 of Frogger" was the only way I could describe the Haitian style of driving. No stop signs or lights, no yellow lines, no sensible traffic laws. The main feat was swerving to avoid the pot holes the size of small craters.

No word can illustrate the amount of rubble and trash in Port Au Prince. It is difficult to distinguish any sort of order to the "housing developments". One house made of four concrete walls and a concrete roof is intact next to a pile of concrete ruins where a house was standing. One year later and only 5% of the destruction of the earthquake has been cleared. Everywhere you look there are crumbled houses, piles of garbage, broken down vehicles covered in dirt, and "tent cities". With the amount of homes destroyed in the earthquake, thousands of people were left homeless. This led to "tent cities" being formed where ever an empty piece of land sat; including a landfill. Tents are staked

nearly on top of one another; some port-a-potties sit outside of the “cities”, however, most are not used or are in desperate need of an emptying. No sewage or water filtering systems are in place; this, obviously, is the root of uncontrolled spread of communicable diseases.

Sunday, we started the day with 7am mass at St. Jude. When we arrived with Father Andrew, there were roughly 20 people sitting praying the rosary in Creole. The church is simply decorated with flowers and green fabric décor. Rows of old wooden benches create about 4 aisles. A USAID tarp and a few 2x4's create an additional seating area off to the back left corner. Four white plastic patio chairs sit two on each side of Father Andrew's seat for the altar boys. A podium covered with green fabric held on by two thumbtacks stands to the left of the altar. Father Andrew stands at the altar looking out onto the congregation; the backdrop is a view of the city. Pillars hold up the ceiling made of cinder blocks, there is no back wall. His story of the earthquake goes as such: at approximately 5pm he held up the chalice to bless, he started to feel the ground shake and as he looked out toward the parishioners he watched the 10 foot stone wall, which separated the church property from the road, crumble. The church was untouched by the earthquake. As our group of 13 “blanchs” sat in the front few benches, local Haitian parishioners crammed like sardines in the closely spaced pews; being 5'2” came in handy in this situation. There was no “unwritten rule” regarding personal space in Haiti. For being 85-90 degrees in the middle of January, it was surprising to see how close everyone sat to ensure enough room for others. Sitting close did not surprise as much as the amount of young adults that attended the mass; and not only was it the attendance but the participation that surprised. The choir was made up of teens to young adults. Bongos created the rhythm of inspirational song. It is hard to describe how music can move someone so much when one cannot understand the language of the song. It was beautifully distributed to the congregation by two large speakers that sat on either side of the altar. The amount of faith shown this day was hard to leave unnoticed. I remember thinking how moving it was to see so much faith proclaimed by ones with so little to be thankful for.

Monday started the four day clinic at St. Jude. Day one involved women over the age of 35. Multiple amounts of aches and pains were voiced; it is no wonder when women are carrying 20-30 pounds of goods on the top of their heads while walking through the streets. Hypertension ran rapid through this population. Some diabetes was seen along with a plentiful amount of post-traumatic stress syndrome with symptoms of increased respirations and anxiety attacks; all symptoms beginning with the earthquake. With each patient we gave a shopping bag prefilled with vitamins, soap, a toothbrush, toothpaste and added their prescription medication. The pharmacy (set up in the sacristy) was stocked full of antibiotics, pain medications, antifungal/antibiotic topical creams, cough medications, diabetic meds, etc. We had quiet the operation.

Tuesday we saw grown men, Wednesday was for babies/kids, and Thursday was scheduled for young adults. Word spread through the church and town that the American doctors had one more day to treat patients, so the last day held the most excitement. Two tin doors hung on loosely screwed hinges, which enclosed the church, nearly got destroyed by the mob of people trying to fight their way in to seek care. When we first arrived to the church for clinic we had approximately 100 people waiting in line to be seen; average patient time to be seen and receive their medication package we figured to be between four to five hours. The "unwritten rule" for personal space applied in the clinic as well; benches were set up for waiting areas and the Haitians were sardined as in church. We saw approximately 825 patients in four days. After rotating through triage, the patient went to see the doctor, then on to the "de-worming" station which gave them a dose of medication to fight worms, then to see the eye doctor (Deacon Jim) if needed, and then finally to the pharmacy where they received their care package. Such a large amount of time spent for basic medications such as vitamins, Tylenol, and/or cough medicine.

On Friday we had a reenergizing day. We went sight-seeing through downtown Port Au Prince where the major damage was done. Large tent cities seemed to go on and on. The amount of help

needed in this city is immeasurable; everything from money and clothes to prayers and sanitization ideas. A water filtering project is in the making with some of the parishioners from St. Jude. It involves a couple buckets and a filter; very basic but a necessity.

The imagines of Haiti will never leave me. I am confident to speak on behalf of my father in saying it has been the most humbling and gratifying experience of our lives. To build a routinely scheduled mission from St. Henry's to aide Father Andrew should be our top priority to take the next step in helping our brothers and sisters in Haiti. We have shown a large amount of compassion in our past collections for the clinic; we now are fortunate enough to become more involved in the rebuilding of such a broken community.