

A Haitian Mother Mourns Daughter's Death with God's Help and Haphazard Start of New School Year

By Pam Mann

Thursday, September 2nd

We were strolling down Rue Vallières, marveling that, finally, during the month of August, work crews had leveled the piles of road fill and made the street open to auto traffic. The neighborhood has waited since Easter for this road to be passable again. One of the "victims" of the road widening was Loulounise, a robust middle-aged grandma with an easy smile. In April she lost her front porch and, then again in June, the engineers told her that her front room also had to be sacrificed, and all this destruction with no compensation.

I remember when I saw her son swinging away at the front wall with a hand sledge, she sat off to the side, witness to every brick's tumble. To my lame offer of condolence, she simply answered, "I have no other choice. Life is whatever God wills."

Yesterday, as we walked to school, Loulounise sat beside a friend in her former front room, now made front porch. She greeted us with a big smile, welcoming us back. When I asked about her family, I wondered particularly about her adult daughter who had escaped the January 12th Port-au-Prince earthquake. The daughter had spent many weeks lying in that very front room with her damaged right leg propped up, having been fractured in the quake by a fallen wall. At Loulounise's request, I had arranged a home visit of a US orthopedic surgeon, a member of a medical team at UMC. He had studied her x-rays, which she already had, examined and interviewed her and then augmented her meds. I was hopeful of good news about her continued progress.

"My daughter died," Loulounise said flatly.

I thought I'd misheard. "Your daughter, who survived the quake and lay right here recovering?"

Loulounise nodded solemnly. My mouth gaped open as I took this in. Loulounise's friend said to her, "Well, you shocked her."

I took a deep breathe. "So how did this happen?"

Loulounise gave her plump shoulders a shrug and then began her tale with knit brows and a tilted head. Only then did I notice that she was dressed in black and white, the mourning colors of Haitians. "She thought that, even without total healing of her leg, she'd go back to Port-au-Prince and look for work. Even with its rubble, she preferred the big city. But once she arrived there, she had abdominal problems with lots of vomiting. Both her legs swelled: the damaged one as well as the good one. Medicine didn't seem to help. She simply grew weaker and weaker until she died on July 7th. We buried her in Port on July 15th. God knows."

I stood dumbstruck, trying to process the news and Loulounise's detached manner in telling it. Dave had been pulled into a conversation with someone else in the street. "How difficult to lose a child," I said finally. "A mother always thinks she will be the first in the grave."

"*Oui*," Loulounise agreed, "but it is God who decides these things. We are all in His hands and He does as He wills." She said this dry-eyed with no visible sign of emotion. It flashed in my memory how I had wept recently after hugging my living children good-bye. I guess I'll never be a stoic Haitian mother, coming, as I do, from a land of longer life expectancy. Mothers here live in a daily battle zone where death is far more common.

We had a teachers' meeting to get to, so we excused ourselves and went on. That's what Loulounise is doing in her own way: going on with life. Within a minute, we were greeting other people on the road with smiles, handshakes, and kisses on cheeks. Within an hour, we were sitting in the first faculty meeting of the 2010-2011 school year, discussing our newest academic challenges. Did everyone in the room carry similar sad news in their memories? Probably.

After the meeting, Ma Wilson brought sandwiches to Dave's office for us. The kitchen crew had made sandwiches for the Atlanta, GA medical team at UMC. She asked about our family and Dave

mentioned that one of our sons plans to work in North Africa. "Life's very different there," Dave explained, "especially for women." He pointed to Ma Wilson's bare arms. "You would not expose your arms there. It could give men too much temptation."

Answering Ma Wilson's questions, eventually Dave explained that, in an Islamic state, women can be the ones punished for adultery by stoning, while men, viewed as victims of their seduction, can escape untouched. She laughed at the absurdity of such an arrangement and pronounced, "So they believe in God but they do not know Jesus."

Dave nodded to affirm her statement's veracity. She shook her head. "Everyone needs Jesus. Everyone." My mind flashed back to Loulounise, dressed for mourning, sitting stoically in her battered house, reduced by progress. Life deals harshly with Haitians and they, in response, mince no words about their outlook on it.

Luke 6:20 "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." Poor believers have no safety net. Maybe that's why they understand the kingdom of God better than I do.

It turned out in the teachers' meeting that our most immediate challenge of the new school year centered on temporal authority or the abuse thereof. It was recently announced that, although school has always begun on the first Monday of September, this year school will start on October 4th. Haitian government schools which serve only 15% of Haitian school children generally begin at least one month after the official start date. This means those children do not get a full school year but, since government teachers and administrators are paid regardless, each fall they choose an additional month of vacation for themselves. This year they will claim the earthquake as their excuse for sloth. In 2008-2009 it was the flooding in Gonaïves. Unlike the government schools, private schools can only ask for tuition (and thus pay salaries) for months that they actually teach classes. At Uniers, the administrators decided to do what's best for the students: to offer class. To minimize harassment of IU students and staff by rabble-rousers in the streets, no one will wear uniforms during September. I predict we will get at best 50% attendance, which does not constitute a real school day for us either. It is a sad case in point that among the greatest obstacles to development in Haiti are those in authority.

So we pray for the miracle that those in power would do what is best for those whom they are employed to serve. We pray for the kingdom to come through us. May the IU leaders model how to be God's kingdom people inside a broken system.

*Pray especially for rulers
and their governments to rule well
so we can be quietly
about our business of living simply,
in humble contemplation.
-- 1 Timothy 2:2
(The Message)*