

First Day of School at Institution Univers---By: Pam Mann

8:30 a.m. Monday, September 7, 2009

I.U. Art room

The first day of school! Classrooms are painted, class rosters posted, schedules planned. In last week's teachers' meeting, Mèt Joe had announced that our first morning would be dedicated to our opening worship time. Regular classes would begin after lunch.

I put the final touches on the art room and headed to Dave's office. Glancing down the hall as I went, I saw the elementary kids lined up by classes, immaculate in their new uniforms. Principal Arsène was ranting about discipline. Rant is the only public speaking style he knows. Those class lines seemed awfully short. The first day you only expect a little more than half the primary students but this was leaner than even that.

"So do you know when the opening assembly is supposed to start?" I asked Dave. He was doing paperwork for a mother applying for a scholarship. He looked up and let out a sigh.

"Well, it's complicated."

Oh-oh, last year's "complicated" meant classes prohibited by the government during September to show solidarity with the hurricane-flooded schools in Gonaïve. Now what? I waited as did the mother who needed the scholarship.

"Apparently the public school teachers are striking because the government owes them back-pay. Yesterday they drove through town with loud speakers, asking private school teachers to strike, too, to support the public school teachers. (Note: 15% of Haitian school children are taught in public schools; 85% in private.) So, our families probably heard this and figured there's no school today. That's why attendance today is ridiculous."

"Oh, man."

"So, Mèt Joe and Hugues have moved the opening assembly to Wednesday. Tomorrow there's no school, to give a tip of the hat to the public teachers' cause. Now, here's the good news. C.F.C.P. called. They want the private schools to organize into an association. Enough of the public school agenda pushing us around."

"That's great. No more of Univers alone against mismanagement. Alleluia!"

"Alleluia!" Dave echoed.

"Alleluia!" I repeated. Realizing we were finally saying something that the poor patient woman seated beside Dave's desk could understand, he turned to her, "Alleluia?"

Being a practiced evangelical, she dutifully raised her hands and joined in, "Alelouya! Alelouya! Beni swa Letènè!" Dave promptly took care of her financial business while I returned to my class prep and errands.

After a savory lunch (beans and rice with okra sauce) Mèt Joe showed us the accord which five of the largest private schools in town signed. It stated that in solidarity with their public school counterparts, their doors would be closed tomorrow, but from Wednesday, September 9th on, the schools would resume classes. Pray that this works. Mèt Joe is working to contact more private schools to joint he coalition, including the newly begun secondary schools of the Catholic brothers and Hope for Haiti.

With our high school classes at 540% and younger elementary classes at 10-20%, it's a lame first day of school. But, in light of the move toward grass-roots unity in private education, it's a great start to the 2009-2010 school year. God is in control and we sense his direction.