

Stories from Ouanaminthe, Haiti By Pam Mann

6:00 a.m., Tuesday, July 14, 2009

Yesterday, Hugues was in Port-Au-Prince, having been in the U.S. over the weekend to deliver James and Pedro to their Cedar Campus escorts in Detroit. There were flight delays. The threesome ended up getting no sleep on Saturday night. But, hallelujah!, the two I.U. seniors are in Michigan, ready for eleven weeks of volunteer work at the InterVarsity camp on Lake Huron. Hugues had so many problems with the U.S. embassy, trying to get their two visas in order that he spent most of the first week of summer camp in Port-au-Prince. Many American supporters of I.U., on hearing snippets of the U.S. embassy's indifference and mismanagement, were indignant, eager to write their representatives, senators, and the President. Dave kept a running log of the debacle for this purpose.

"No, I don't think we want to do that," said Hugues, sitting in Dave's office, exhausted from his weekend international jaunt. "It seems some supervisor questioned, after the fact, our receiving ten visas in one day. That's very rare."

A miracle, I was thinking.

"In the end, we got the visas," Hugues continued. "We won't complain."

But I complained, "I don't like the fact that my tax dollars are paying to augment bureaucratic inefficiency in Haiti – by Americans, no less!"

Hugues patiently shook his head. "If ever they refuse us, then, we will complain and explain all our history with them."

Finally I nodded in agreement, knowing Dave also was concerned that if we complained, it could come back to bite us. Thus, we find ourselves in yet another arena of struggle, just to improve the quality of life in Ouanaminthe through education and medical care.

Meanwhile summer camp is in its fourth and final week. The heat and humidity have been oppressive with no rain since the deluge on Thursday in week 1. During that storm, the PA Lutherans with a few NJ Baptists were caught in a visit at Sister Elaine's old folks' home. We had to wade through ankle-deep street-wide "puddles" to return to IU, providing entertainment to many along our way.

The PA-NJ team had the tough job of helping with graduation on Sunday and then jumping the next day into summer camp with an all-time high enrollment of 290 kids 1st through 12th grades, not counting fourteen student translators. They were short on planned supplies but they adjusted and made things work. At the same time that we had the most kids ever, we had the least space. Mèt Joe had accepted for IU to be a testing site for the summer camp was restricted to one hallway of classrooms and the auditorium. Mèt Joe had figured we could have the Kindergarten building too, but that's still under renovation and thus hardly usable. I felt like the Israelite slaves given less straw and told to make more bricks. With classrooms packed with wall-to-wall desks, we managed.

The North Hampton United Methodists returned after a two-year hiatus to staff week 2. They were only eleven strong but fearless and flexible. They even dared to challenge IU to a volleyball match to be followed by a soccer showdown. The V-game score was grim enough that IU gave all the student translators to the American team for the next day's soccer match. Then there was a real game. ☺

The last half of summer camp was staffed by UALC: twelve for week 3 and eight for week 4. The IU kids loved the choreographed upbeat songs that UALC brought. All the teams brought energy and enthusiasm which language barriers do not seem to hinder. There were still playground fights, little girl spats, boys who slipped off to play basketball during opening worship BUT these could not stop the magic. Our students knew that they were blessed to have these foreigners lavish so much attention on them. The last day of camp kids were weeping that it was over.

3:30 p.m., Wednesday, July 22

Hugues told Dave & me around noon today that he really thought we should participate in the Ministry of Education's forum being held at IU today, tomorrow, and Friday. Neither Dave nor I had this conference on our agenda for our last two days in Ouanaminthe. I had been going through the summer camp leftover supplies when Hugues made this pronouncement. Dave was trying to balance his financial records despite regular interruptions for money transactions: parents with tuition payments or workmen who needed cash for this and that.

6:00 a.m., Thursday, July 23

We went grudgingly to the main session of the conference after coming home to shower and change into appropriate clothes. The speakers and topics were interesting enough. They asked how do we address the issues of 500,000 unschooled children (ages 5-12) in Haiti, majority of teachers are untrained, high repeat rate of students (only 11% finish six grades of elementary school in six years), setting standards for private and public schools, etc. I tried to be engaged, taking notes, but my heart was not in it. I was ready for some R&R. How does Hugues keep going?

8:00 a.m. same day

We're praying frantically for François Eliance. Thanks to the UALC surgical team, he received much needed hernia surgery last Tuesday. Once opened though, his procedure proved much more complex than the surgeon had anticipated. It took more than two hours to attach what should have been connected and to detach what should have never been joined.

Interestingly, while this lean hard-working medical team stayed long hours on tough cases at UMC, their summer camp colleagues were teaching the story of Gideon's faith with his small but mighty army -- at IU. Did Gideon know how it would all turn out as he blew his trumpet and crashed his clay pot to light up the night with his torch? No, he was just trusting God and encouraging his 300 men to do likewise.

Eliance is trusting despite pain, swelling, blood in his urine, high blood pressure and a very anxious wife. "There'll be pain the doctor said," Eliance repeated to us as he had each time we visited him. "I finally peed a lot this morning. I think they gave me something for my high blood pressure yesterday. Maybe that did it."

Dave and I exchanged dubious glances. We regularly lament that we just live in the clinic. We know nothing about medical care except that Haitians need it desperately and can't afford it. Eliance mentioned that he couldn't afford additional meds which were suggested yesterday. Hopefully with the cash Dave slipped Eliance, he'll get meds he needs during our absence.

Eliance's cell phone rang as we chatted in his living room. His is a nice working-class home -- cement block painted pink inside and out, pastel curtains hung in every entrance way, framed art prints (several religious) askew on the walls often garnished with silk floral bouquets, stems up. The furniture is hand-carved Haitian.

Eliance's caller was inquiring about his health. As with us, Eliance offered "not too bad" responses. "Yes, there's a lot of pain. It's not easy but we trust in God."

As he said this, my mind reran the tape of summer camp with the kids singing that exact theme. They know it in English and Creole. "Never be dismayed. Jesus has won the battle. When we feel afraid, we're gonna say: Trust in God for today. We will trust in God for today."

It turned out that Minès was the caller. Both Minès and Eliance patiently conversed with us three and a half years ago when we were fledgling Creole speakers. Both men were regulars on the IU school grounds, Minès selling sno-cones, Eliance fried pastries from his family business. The economy has not improved. They still struggle despite their hard work. The difference for us is that now we know in part how they struggle. As we said our good-byes to Eliance, my mind was flashing back to faces of team members of recent months -- people who also know in part the Haitian struggle -- tears acknowledging poverty -- smiles at Haitian humor -- puzzlement at the complexity of Haiti's issues -- fatigue -- annoyance at the heat, dirt, inefficiency. The common current charging them all is faith. We will keep on just as Eliance does because Jesus has won the battle.