

Hey You!

Musings from a Haitian Mission Trip

By Christina Wetjen Brinson

Riding in an open truck in Haiti is a remarkable experience; it helps you feel an impending sense of your own mortality unlike many other life experiences can. Along the way, you at some point move past constant prayer and begin to absorb the colors, sounds and smells that flow by in a blur. Many children smile and wave. The more bold ones smile and call out “Hey You!” Our translators explain the odd address in this way; UN troops in Haiti often do not speak the native language of Kreyol, so when they need to address someone, they often call “Hey You!” Following suit, the local children often address the “blan” (white) foreigners in this fashion.

Much of the mission of Family Health Ministries is called “the mission of presence.” People meeting people, working side-by-side and forming relationships. Allowing people to learn about the spirit of God through its presence in others. In this spirit, I make a very cognizant decision; I will not be anonymous on this trip. It is easy to be in Haiti, to work, to make friends within my mission group, and to feel good about myself. It is harder to reach out to others, so that they will see me as a person and know I see them. I am nervous, my Kreyol miniscule. So, being a mother, like mothers everywhere, I first reach out to other mothers. First, a smile to a wary-faced stranger, then smiles for their children. Reaching into my stylish “fanny-pack” I withdraw pictures of my children. “Mon petit” I say haltingly; suddenly my new friend smiles. I pantomime ages and share their names, Katie and Gillian. My friend smiles and joins me in the language of motherhood, with love and pride pointing to her children or sharing photos. These small interactions give me the strength and courage to reach out more often.

In Cite Soleil, our group works to tear off rusty, damaged aluminum roofing and replace it with shiny new sheets. In Haiti, the workmen are extremely nervous and unable to focus on the dangerous job at hand when there are women climbing onto the roof to work (as American women are apt to do). I am therefore relegated to ground duty, stacking old roofing, handing up tools, and praying that the children running around will not get rusty roofing nails in their bare feet. There are times of waiting in which I felt quite useless, until I begin to play with the children, which I believe is an important part of our “mission of presence.” Now we are working again and the children call out “Hey You!” Many children ask us for food and drinking water. Many simply want our affection or to see their picture on a digital camera. At some point, I decide I will no longer answer to “Hey You!” So I say emphatically “Mwen rele no “Hey You!” “Mwen rele Chris.” The kids think this is a riot! I don’t know if it is my amazing mastery of Kreyol pronunciation or the fact that they think I have a boy’s name. Anytime they address me as “Hey You!” My reply is the same “Mwen rele no “Hey You!” “Mwen rele Chris.” To my joy the children and their parents begin calling me Chris.

Anonymity it seems is a Novocain of sorts. As I work with my teammates and our new Haitian friends, I am overwhelmed by everything that still needs to be done. I feel numb and a bit powerless. A voice breaks through my mental haze. “Chris, Hey Chris!” Now

many voices “Chris, Hey Chris!” “Chris I am hungry.” “Chris I am thirsty.” “Chris I am lonely.” Chris, Chris, Chris. I have never felt so personally and directly called to action. It makes my stomach hurt and my heart ache. These children make me *feel* their need and compel me to act. It is easy to feel it’s someone else’s burden if you hear only “Hey You!” When you are called by name to do something about another person’s suffering, it is much harder to ignore.

I am Chris, a working wife and mom. What can I do? I am not rich. I am not famous. As a mom, I feel in a small way responsible for all children. If I see a small child lost in a store or about to be hurt in some way, I am compelled to act. Now that I am no longer just “Hey You!” I am compelled to act for Mon Haitian Petit. I am sharing their story. It is a story of joy, hope, and laughter; of great need, and a daily quest for survival. The need can be overwhelming, but if we each bring our personal gift to the task at hand, together we can effect change. My gift is talking to people and making them smile. I plan to keep talking about Haiti and her children to anyone who will listen. What gift do you carry within you?