

## Summer of Service 2017~ Fontaine, Haiti

### Katie Burke Class of 2018

Over the summer I traveled to a small village in the northern plateau of Haiti called



Fontaine. I traveled there with Greg Altman and together we took on a life changing adventure. We stayed at St. Gabriel's school in Fontaine for six weeks and mainly taught English at the both primary and secondary schools throughout the village. Time in Haiti was an interesting mix of fast and slow as we

become immersed in the community. Though our time there was brief, I believe Greg and I both learned a lot about ourselves and the Haitian way of life. I don't know if we made an impact on the village of Fontaine, but I do know that they made an impact on me. They pushed my communication skills to the limit and helped me to find ways to make connections without words. It is a skill I hope to bring into my medical practice one day.

When we arrived off the plane, a smiling Pierre Louis, in a purple Toyota pickup truck, greeted Greg and I and we began our journey to the northern plateau. That initial car ride was an adventure to say the least. It was a six-hour journey, most of it on unpaved



roads, and about half in the dark. We forded what looked to be a fast moving river and

constantly honked in an attempt to not hit the many thousands of people that moved through the streets day and night. By the end of the ride we knew if we could make it through that, we could make it through anything.

When we arrived at the school we were treated to a welcome feast by Madam



Waldeck. She is the cook for the guests at the school.

Waldeck did not speak any English, but the longer

Greg and I stayed the more she wanted to try. By the

end she would take us into the kitchen and show us

how she prepared the food. No one can pluck a

chicken faster than Waldeck! On our last day she gave

us both a hug and told us we were like children to

here. Her welcome and care was one of the most memorable experiences of the trip.

As is often the way in Haitian culture, time is not a concept that they practice.

Therefore, when we showed up the first couple of days were pretty slow. Pierre did not

have a schedule for us, which meant Greg and I had to find our own ways of getting

involved. We spent the first few days shadowing another English teacher, now a great

friend, Brother Bill. He was a constant

companion to us for the six weeks helping us

understand Haitian culture and to be honest

life in general. Brother Bill is a seventy-three

year old missionary who has been teaching

English for his whole life as a Xaverian

Brother. Brother Bill taught us how to give



everything you have to a cause and how to treat each day of your life as a gift.



At the end of the first week our teaching officially began. We had a jam packed schedule teaching up to five classes a day in grades ranging from pre-school to seniors in high school. Our other slight dilemma was that neither Greg nor I knew much if any Haitian Creole. This meant that we would spend afternoons lesson planning trying to

learn basic vocabulary so that we could teach the students on a day-to-day basis. For the younger children we often would try to incorporate songs because the Haitian people love music. Trying to communicate in this way was challenging but also extremely rewarding.

While I would not consider myself conversational in Haitian Creole by any stretch of the imagination struggling to learn the language helped me to bond with many individuals at the school. Students were always eager to work with the visitors who wanted to learn.

One of my favorite afternoons involved Greg and I sitting in a classroom with six eight graders trying to go back and forth having a conversation about our families. We all wanted

very deeply to understand where the other was coming from and as we mixed English, Spanish, and Creole we did manage to learn a lot about each other. That struggle and desire for communication



among people is a beautiful experience and I will remember it for the rest of my life.

While teaching was fun, our favorite place to go was a small orphanage down the



street in the late afternoon before dinner. The children were scared of us at first, but once we began to show up everyday they really warmed up. We would often play soccer and listen to a Bluetooth speaker out in the backfield of the orphanage. It was a time to laugh, play, and let loose. About halfway through, the kids took an interest in our cell phones. They loved to play the games we had on our phone as well as take

photos. By the end of the trip my storage was almost full because of the amount of pictures they took. On our last day the kids kept saying “Rete, rete,” to the two of us. At the time

Greg and I had no clue what they were saying. We found out later that night that in Creole, rete means stay. That was an emotional moment for all of us because we had broken into those kid’s lives and made a bond with them without even speaking. The beauty of an experience like that is still hard for me to put into



words, but when I am struggling I frequently think back to those kids and the laughter and joy we shared.

One last major project we worked on was a piping project that would eventually pump water to the roof of the school. The goal was to use to pump to irrigate a field so that St. Gabriel's could grow its own food and provide more nutritious lunches for the students.



Unfortunately, before the men got there to put in the pump a path had to be made through a sugar cane field and a trench needed to be dug. In true Haitian form, they waited until two days before the men got there to do any of this. Greg and I offered to cut the path. We spent an afternoon in the

Haitian heat chopping down a sugar cane forest with machetes and an axe. Sweat dripped down our faces for three hours, but finally we made it to the other side. A few of our friends came to help move the sugar cane out of the way as we continued to whack a path. It showed how much the Haitian people desire to help one another, and made Greg and I feel as though we were accepted into the community. In the end the solar powered pump was put in the ground. It was a great moment for the village.



When we were not working Greg and I did a lot of exploring, especially on the weekends. This time helped us form bonds with some of the older students and also get a feel for the Haitian landscape. We hiked some mountains, walked to two of the other cities, and spent time at the market in Pignon. The market is central to Haitian culture and

survival. All the colors and the food were a sight to behold. If you want to understand Haiti, you really need to go to the market place on a Saturday. One of the best things we did was attend some of the school's soccer games. The pace is so fast and the footwork is amazing. It was great to watch how excited the community became when a soccer game was being played.



My experience in Haiti was one that I will look back upon fondly for the rest of my life. I do hope to go back as a physician and help the community in any way that I can. The Haitian culture is one of welcome and beauty. Everyday I spent there was a new adventure and I would not trade the experiences for anything.