

Hands and Hearts for Haiti

By : Erik Phelan



With anxious hearts and minds filled with so many questions unanswered, seventeen Salesian young adults (Fr. Steve Ryan, Br. Rob Malusa, Br. Dieunel Victor, Br. Minh Dang, Meg Fraino, Maureen Gleason, Stephanie Desanges, Daphne Souvenir, Alex Eustache, Saverio Amendola, Steve DeMaio, Pedro Silva, Matt Konecni, Erik Phelan, Chris Khoudary, Jerry Rodriguez, and Juan Carlos Montenegro) packed their bags, boarded the plane, and headed for Haiti to have our lives turned upside down for ten days on Gospel Roads III. A diverse group we were, offering all the pieces to a puzzle of unity. From people who crossed the language and cultural barrier to those who bring mission experience with them, along with fresh minds and bodies ready to soak it all in. We grabbed our mission to Haiti by the horns and didn't stop riding until we stepped foot back in the U.S.

The Haitian culture is one filled with mystery and beauty, an essence of pride oozing out of each of them, never to be defeated even in lieu of an unforgiving earthquake. It was an earthquake that destroyed lives, homes, streets and cities, but it could never take away from that feeling of national pride within the Haitian community. We felt that sense of pride as soon as we were welcomed to the Salesian community in Thorland, to find people smiling with joy on our arrival and commitment to them. Our attempts to divulge into their culture were met by their desire to accept ours. And though we wanted to make so many sacrifices and live in the same conditions as the people we were there to assist, these Salesians did everything they could to help us help them.



Haiti is a beautiful country, but the real beauty is found in the faces of hope-filled youth. Their smiling faces brought infinite joy to struggling times. Finding ourselves in a community undone, nervous yet determined, we all seemed to have this internal instinct. When the children first spotted us and needed more attention than the world could give them, we knew just what to do. That was to love them, hug them, work, dance, and play with them. They are like a medicine to a person with lost faith or a man with a rigid soul. All they need is for someone to reach out their hand, give them a high five, or simply smile their way. And that is all we needed in return.

We were given several tasks, proving our physical strength to go along with our fierce spirituality. We spent a few days constructing a fence which stabilized the Salesian infrastructure to help them further support the people, especially the youth and continue their mission in the advancement of society. Our presence there helped to bring out the integrity of the Haitian people. As we worked we were accompanied everyday by people and children from the tent city on the Salesian property willing to work to make their home a better place. After a challenge offered to us to play with them in a basketball game at the local court (which I think everyone will admit they kicked our butts) we thought on and put the idea into action to build new backboards for them. The Salesian community as well as the greater community on the property has many needs. And everyday we were met with challenges but we put one foot in front of the other and as a team were able to bring support to many different areas of the community. We also put together blackboards for the school program on the property as well as built shelving for the supply/donation room on the property. But every chance we

had to put down the hammer and be present to the children, we did! At the end of the week we held a show for the children of the community where we put together some of our talents to present as well as went through some of the songs we had been teaching them throughout the week.



Ten days is never enough to save the world but its enough to make lasting promises to give it your best shot. Being part of such a lively community, being accepted and loved, is a feeling none of us will ever forget. The people of Haiti are so much stronger than I expected, after such a devastating time. Their passion for life and their nation is inspiring and they won't be defeated. Ten days of blood, sweat, tears and dreams gained Americans and Haitians for one cause, Life!

Many Thanks to the Salesian community in Thorland who hosted us during our stay. To see their selfless simplicity and humility during the week was also very inspiring. The need for the people in Haiti is so great and if we walked away with anything it was a yearning to return and to continue rebuilding for the people. Many great relationships were formed and we left feeling connected to our greater Salesian family. The Salesians in Haiti still need our help! There will be many years of rebuilding ahead of us. One mission trip is not enough. Throughout the week we were able to identify many needs for the Salesians. This is not the last trip to Haiti. Let us form a solidarity plan for our family in Haiti and continue to give support.