



Face to Face in Milot

An Essay:

A Car Wreck Story

by Zoe Zuyus, Spring 2015

I am a member of Avondale Presbyterian Church, and we have helped start a mission where we deliver food to the elderly in the town of Milot, Haiti. We work together with a team of local Haitians who help select the people to whom we provide rice, beans and oil on a bi-monthly basis. We help around 30 people and work with our local Haitian volunteers to deliver the provisions by back-pack in the rural town. Most all of our people on the delivery list are suffering from different levels of disabilities ranging from paralysis to blindness, deafness, severe malnutrition and physical handicaps. We feel led to help the elderly as they are often overlooked—many of the aid programs focus on children. These people have become our friends and have taught us many things about life and the importance of serving each other.

I have been traveling to Haiti for several years. During the development of this program, I have become very close to Jacqueline Valmyr, who is in charge of the program from the Haiti side. Jacqueline is responsible for the initial mission of serving the elderly people in his commu-

nity, determining the needs and identifying who among the community is the most in need. Without him, this program would not exist. He and his team are very selective as to who we can help based on the particular circumstances of each individual. To the outside world, they all look like they would need our help; however, there is a level of suffering that only someone like Jacqueline—who was born and raised in Milot—can see. We depend on him to make sure that we are getting these resources to the right people. The selection process can be overwhelming because to our eyes, we see everyone in need; Jacqueline and his team are able to narrow it down for us.

Every trip I take to Haiti is interesting and rewarding. However, on my most recent trip, something out of the ordinary occurred. I decided to go early prior to the four other members of our church. My reason was simple. I wanted to spend time with Jacqueline and his family, all of whom I have grown to love. I have formed friendships that are extremely important to me. Jacqueline and I are the same age and share a passion for helping others. He is a dynamic person who works tirelessly building schools, delivering supplies and translating for visitors, among many other responsibilities. He

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has created a wonderful life in a country where it takes incredible commitment and drive just to survive. His story is one of the most inspiring I have heard. To the outside world it would not appear he has much: A home built of concrete, running water, electricity (which is extremely rare) and a truck. Jacqueline gives all the credit to God, and as he would say, “We are blessed.”

On this recent visit, Jacqueline and I decided to go into Cap Haitian in advance of the other participants’ arrivals, to buy the supplies we needed for our purpose of delivering food. We use his pick up truck as we generally purchase 10 to 15 fifty-pound bags of rice, beans and cases of cooking oil. When we get home, we break them down into smaller bags to distribute to our 30 folks we serve. We then load up backpacks and haul the food to our friends all through Milot. Very good exercise!

On this trip into Cap Haitian that day, we had only traveled a mile or so outside of Milot when we spotted a group of Haitians on the side of the road. As we got closer, we could see there was a terrible accident. The first reaction we both had was “we need to help.” In a third world country there are no ambulances and rarely even doctors around so you can’t just roll down the window and say “call 911!”

About 100 yards off of the road, I could see an SUV upside down leaning against a tree. The vehicle cab was smashed so the people inside, I assumed, were in bad shape. The horn was still honking and there was smoke and broken glass. We pulled up literally minutes after the accident happened. There were probably 15 to 20 Haitians around yelling and screaming. It was incredibly chaotic. I speak a little Creole, but thank God for Jacqueline, who was able to communicate quickly with someone. We were still in the truck when a Haitian man told us there were six passengers in the vehicle. He said it appeared two were dead and the other four were seriously injured. I told them we need to get as many of the victims into the truck as possible so we could drive them back to Milot, where there is a hospital in the town (Hôpital Sacré Coeu). For Haitian standards, it is a good hospital and many physicians and nurses from the United States come there to volunteer.

Thankfully, for the victims of the crash, the hospital was close by. I got out of the truck and told Jacqueline to turn it around so we could load the victims and go to the hospital. The Haitians already pulled some of the victims from the wreckage and started carrying them toward the truck. These people were remarkable as they moved so quickly. I was incredulous at how much compassion was being shown by everyone

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there. As we loaded four victims into the truck, I realized how badly they were injured. I could tell they were all in shock. No one spoke, and they all had this glaze of intense distress in their eyes. There was a tremendous amount of blood and without being a doctor, even I could tell there were multiple broken bones. One lady in particular had a horrible cut across her face and both eyes. She did not look good, and I could remember feeling like we needed to get her to the hospital quickly. When we were able to get the victims somewhat stabilized in the truck, many of the Haitians jumped in as well. They began helping apply pressure to the bleeding wounds, in addition to just holding the victims to try and give comfort. There was such deep concern and kindness.

When we arrived at the hospital, volunteers were already bringing stretchers out to the road. Keep in mind this is not an American emergency room. There was a crowd of people, and we literally stopped in the middle of the road and unloaded these poor folks onto stretchers. I also remember feeling a little overwhelmed as all of these people were speaking a different language, and I was simply just trying to get them on a stretcher and into the building. Inside there awaited some American doctors whom I know needed to see them ASAP. The whole scene was very confusing, and I can only

say without being a writer, it was surreal. There were these people who were covered in blood and some sort of white substance. I found out later it was a bucket of plaster that was in the back of the SUV but at the time I really didn't know what I was seeing. I just know it was scary and the sight of all this made me a little nauseous. When they were finally inside, Jacqueline and I got into the truck and headed back towards Cap Haitian. This whole process from picking them up to dropping them off happened so fast. I was in shock for a good part of the drive into town wondering about the poor people we dropped off. Unfortunately, I think Jacqueline—and probably many Haitians—are used to severe accidents, and this did not seem to bother him as much. I am not saying he did not care—it just simply seems when you live in a third world, you process these events on a different level.

Upon our return from Cap Haitian with our supplies, I asked Jacqueline to stop briefly at Hôpital Sacré Coeu. The hospital is on the main road, and all you have to do is stop in front of it and yell out the window to speak to someone working there. Jacqueline pulled over and asked the first person he saw about the people we dropped off only a couple hours ago. The person replied saying there were broken bones and many lacerations but they all had life. I was so

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relieved to hear no one died and they were being taken care of. Jacqueline turned to me and smiled and said, “They have Life.” I am not sure why this way of saying “they are ok” has stuck with me, but that sentence alone really puts another perspective of how people from Haiti view the world differently than us. It really stops and makes you think. Incidentally, during the moment of chaos and confusion surrounding the accident, we were told two passengers had died. This turned out to not be true. Thankfully, no one died in the wreck.

Sounds like a happy ending—but wait, it gets better. Two days later, Jacqueline and I went to Cap Haitian to pick up the rest of the travelers from Avondale who were coming to Haiti to help deliver the food. I shared with them the experience of the car wreck and how Jacqueline and I got there at almost the exact time it occurred. I told them how we took them to the hospital in Milot, and we heard they were all going to survive. They were all amazed at the story and were glad I was there to help.

Eventually, we moved on to our mission at hand of breaking down the provisions and delivering the supplies to our 30 elderly folks we serve. This is a big job. Not only do we have to separate everything down into 30 portions, but we also have to deliver. The locations are all

over Milot, and many are along the mountains where the only way is strapping on a backpack and walking it in. I consider myself pretty fit and it still takes all day and wears you out in the Haitian heat. That being said, it is an extremely rewarding experience and a great way to get to see our friends throughout the community.

Every visit our church makes to Milot, we always have a recap meeting to discuss how things are going, usually the night before we depart Haiti. The meeting includes the people from our church as well as Jacqueline and four or five other local Haitians (this group makes the deliveries when we are not there). These other Haitian members are people from the community: Two pastors, a neighbor and a man named Pierre that works at the Hôpital Sacré Coeu. I could not wait to ask him about the people we dropped off. I told him the whole story again and he was very aware of the individuals. As we had heard before, he said they all had life and that they were very fortunate. I was grateful again to hear. It is hard to explain the feeling as I did not know these people, but being with them at such a pivotal time, somehow makes you feel connected.

Pierre’s role at Hôpital Sacré Coeu is to act as a coordinator between the community and the hospital. He finds out when volunteers from the

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United States are coming and what their specialties are. He in turn talks to all the churches and other groups in the community to keep them aware of what types of doctors will be in the country. One week it could be an orthopedic surgeon, the other week it could be a doctor of internal medicine. It simply depends on volunteer availability. Curious, I inquired of him who they had that week volunteering, and he told me that they had a maxillofacial surgeon with them. I did not give it that much thought at the time. We finished our meeting and discussed ideas for our next visit.

It was a rewarding trip to Haiti. In the morning we were heading back to the US. I never had a chance to go by the hospital to check on the people I dropped off and felt a little guilty. I reasoned that they didn't know me, and how could I really communicate? My Creole is rudimentary at best. As we drove by the hospital on the way to the airport, I could not help but think of them.

The crazy part of the story

We all arrived at the airport and went through the torment of going through customs and getting our boarding passes. This is a little more difficult in Haiti than in other countries. We finally made it through to the terminal where we

were waiting to board our plane. We had some time to kill and we were on our smart phones and just relaxing when I noticed a young man in a wheel chair. He looked familiar—and then it hit me. I asked him, “Did you get in a really bad car wreck near Milot?” He answered “I don’t know,” in English. Then almost immediately his mom walked around the corner and I definitely recognized her: She had a cast on her arm, two black eyes and severe facial injuries. Her name is Nicole, she is from New York and was in Haiti with her son and husband visiting relatives when they were in that horrific accident. I explained to her how I had helped get her to the hospital and how worried I had been. I was just astonished to see them standing there. Her husband was there as well. He was in severe pain and appeared to have a broken shoulder as well as a broken neck (which I found out about later). Her son, in the wheelchair, had a head injury, and had no memory of the accident.

I had assumed the victims in the wreck were Haitians as they never spoke when we took them to the hospital. Nicole told me if she did not get there as quickly as she did, she would now be blind (Keep in mind what Pierre had told me about what type of surgeon just happened to be in the country!). This whole episode was truly one of the most remarkable experiences of my life. It makes one wonder: We were simply

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waiting for our plane, and there they were. It provided a sense of closure that I realized I probably needed. Nicole called her daughter and put me on the phone with her. We talked for awhile there in the airport. She was understandably emotional and wanted to tell me thank you. Nicole and I traded numbers and promised to get in touch later when we were back in the US.

A couple of months had passed and my phone rang. It was Nicole from New York, and it was incredible to hear from her. They were all still recovering. They each had to have multiple more surgeries back in the United States. It turns out that Nichole is a nurse so she is aware of how dire their situation was. Her husband ended up having a broken neck as well as other fractures that had required surgery. Her son was still getting surgeries on his leg and recovering. She also had a cracked vertebra and a broken arm, not to mention her severe facial injury which almost blinded her. They are each currently in physical therapy. We talked for a long time and promised to stay in touch. For some reason, I believe we will.

I believe God was involved in this entire event, just like He is involved in all of our lives. Some stories like these don't end up with happy endings and for those folks, I can only have

compassion and sympathy. I have come to the conclusion that God at times can remind us that some things are beyond our comprehension. I'm not sure why I was there when the accident happened. I'm not sure why I saw the family in the airport. Maybe there will be more to add to all this one day. Maybe not. But in either case, whatever happens, I have felt compelled to tell this story. It has become a part of me that I cannot—nor do I want to—let go. And so, I share it with you.

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