2015

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Recommended Citation

Brizgys, Lauren A. (2015) "More Than Just Words: My Experience in Haiti," *Purdue Journal of Service-Learning and International Engagement*. Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

DOI: 10.5703/1288284315687

Available at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/pjsl/vol2/iss1/2>

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MORE THAN JUST WORDS:

My Experience in Haiti

Lauren Ann Brizgys, College of Agriculture

ABSTRACT

A Purdue student describes her view of Haitian culture and reflects on how her perspectives changed following this experience.

INTRODUCTION

During the weeks that led up to our departure to Cap-Haïtien, there was a constant nervous buzz throughout our class. We were excited to be a small part of a long-term partnership between Purdue University and Université Anténor Firmin (UNAF), but also nervous to enter a country where we were the minority. My classmates and I did not know how to prepare for a trip where we did not speak or understand the language.

PURPOSE

The city of Cap-Haïtien is home to roughly 200,000 people living in confined spaces. Homes in the city were small and typically made of cement, but as you drove into the country and farther from the coastline, homes were more commonly made of sticks and mud. The country is constantly bombarded with high temperatures, little shade, and no rain. The lack of moisture impacts Haiti's agriculture because families are trying to grow crops in dust, with minimal opportunity to properly irrigate their fields. Our service-learning trip was focused on bringing information and supplies to the Haitian students of UNAF so we could help them to help themselves. We were expected to teach the students "our ways" about agriculture and make some kind of lasting impact.

EXPERIENCE

Our first encounter in Haiti was the airport, which was much different than what we were used to in the United States. This airport was small, with everything in one large room. As I reflect on our body language and communication during the first hour or so of our landing, I am sure we looked like a scared herd of cattle. We were all clustered together, slouched over with downcast eyes, and very quiet. Even the most ambitious students were silent as we stole glances toward security guards, workers, and Purdue partners, as they all tried to tell us what to do in French and Creole. I was nervous as I walked through security. The guard who was checking my bag was trying to speak to me, but I was flustered because I had never been in a situation where I did not know how to tell someone what I was thinking. In my frustration, I grinned and shrugged my shoulders. That was the defining moment between the guard and me; he grinned back and shrugged with me. Even though no words were exchanged, the guard and I were able to laugh and share a moment of understanding.

As we stepped out of the airport and onto the dirt road of Cap-Haïtien, my fellow students and I were welcomed with open arms by our Haitian partner, Gedeon Eugene: "*Bienvenue chez mes amis*" ("Welcome home my friends"). There was much to take in within those first few seconds: the landscape, the smell, the heat, and the strangers surrounding us.

The most memorable encounter my class and I had was on the first day of our trip. We were all very quiet

Figure 1. Holly Renner and classmates interacting with Terra Rouge community youth.

Figure 2. UNAF student, Eve, and myself.

during our farm visit to North Coast. No one spoke up to ask questions or offer suggestions; we didn't even speak to each other on our bus. The last visit we were scheduled to make was to an area of land where there was potential to build a poultry facility. Our bus stopped in what seemed to be the center of a Haitian town, which drew a lot of attention from the residents. Everyone stopped what they were doing and looked at us, some with awe, while others seemed shy. I was terrified of drawing attention to myself, as were my classmates, so I quickly walked through their town with my eyes at my feet. While we toured the potential facility, children began to walk toward the walls of the facility and ask if we had water or food. It was hard to tell them no without explaining why, especially since they could see the water bottles in our bags. Even though we could not share our water with the kids, they smiled and held up their hands in a gesture that invited us to play hand games with them. Their friendly demeanors and overall kindness to strangers was encouraging. As we ended our poultry tour, Dr. Mark Russell encouraged us to go say hello. We all looked at him for a moment, confused, and then slowly made our way back toward the town

where our bus waited. The more ambitious students in our group immediately went to meet the town children, while the more shy students, myself included, hung back by our professor and watched them break the ice. Some of my friends jumped right into the children's hopscotch game and clapped and smiled to show the children they wanted to play, while others began to teach the children how to play red hands. It was incredible how, with just a few gestures and smiles, the entire village came out to play. I watched from a distance for a while, enjoying the chance to observe this still foreign culture. Soon families were walking out of their homes to gather in the street and watch the games. Children were running from all directions to our bus to join in the fun.

As more Haitians joined in, I became more aware of my own shyness. I stood there wishing that I was brave enough, like my friends, to go meet strangers who did not speak my language. I wanted to join in but my feet felt cemented to the ground. My heart seemed to climb into my throat with the thought of making a fool of myself. Dr. Russell stood next to me, noticed my anxiety, and casually said to me, "This is a long trip that will be filled with wonderful memories if you are just willing to jump in and go with it." At that moment I let go of my fears, took a deep breath, and stepped forward with a smile. I was instantly surrounded by children who were around seven years old, trying to teach me to play red hands. I knelt down and put my hands out to them, and we began a very competitive game filled with giggles, gasps, and smiles.

Later that night, when we finally boarded the bus to go to our hotel, our class structure had changed. We began the day as strangers to the country and amongst ourselves, but as the sun set, we shared our smiles with each other and began to laugh and sing along with the radio. Our class became our family in that moment because we all opened up to each other without saying

one word. Instead we shared an experience that would knit us together for more than just the trip.

REFLECTION

I had not expected Haitians to look kindly toward us during our stay because of who we were and where we were from. I was afraid. I did not expect to be accepted immediately, as a friend or a fellow Haitian. I now know that I was stuck in my cultural ways of arrogance, ignorance, and righteousness. What I found was that we were not judged by our skin color, possessions, or U.S. privileges. Instead, we were surrounded by friends who were as excited to share their knowledge with us as we were with them. I learned that this culture is full of beautiful people who do not need to be changed. Rather, we should all collaborate. For me, Haiti was filled with little moments, all of which our group shared together as a family—from small waves to shy children at UNAF to grandiose "Bonswa's" that we shouted out the window of our bus as we passed by. What we had envisioned to be a third-world country turned into a home away from home, filled with memories that we will never be able to replace. I did not expect to grow in such a dynamic way while I was in Haiti. All it took was the courage to step out with a smile.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Acknowledgment is provided to my service project mentor, Dr. Mark Russell, and my writing mentor, Dr. JoAnn Phillion.

Brizgys, L. A. (2015). More than just words: My experience in Haiti. *Purdue Journal of Service-Learning and Engagement*, 2, 3–5. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5703/1288284315687>