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June 2014

Enriching Haiti

Mission Trip Becomes a Partnership at Teachers Summit

Teachers to Return to Haiti this July

Zeeland educators vow to make an impact at Haitian Teacher Summit.

hibu community magazine staff

Haiti is known as the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, devastated by poverty, hunger, and earthquake devastation, says Laurie Poll, principal of New Groningen Elementary in Zeeland. Children need food, safety, to be cared for and most importantly, an education. For several years there has been a group of educators who have spent a part of their summer break to work alongside Haitian teachers — forming a partnership. The group of American teachers begin their planning the week they return from the current year's trip, Poll explains. Zeeland Life had a chance to speak with the principal in late April to learn about the experience.

Q: How many years have faculty of Zeeland Public Schools taken trips to Haiti?

There have been groups serving in Haiti with our Teacher Summit since 2009. Some of us were able to see Haiti before the large earthquake and then have returned since.

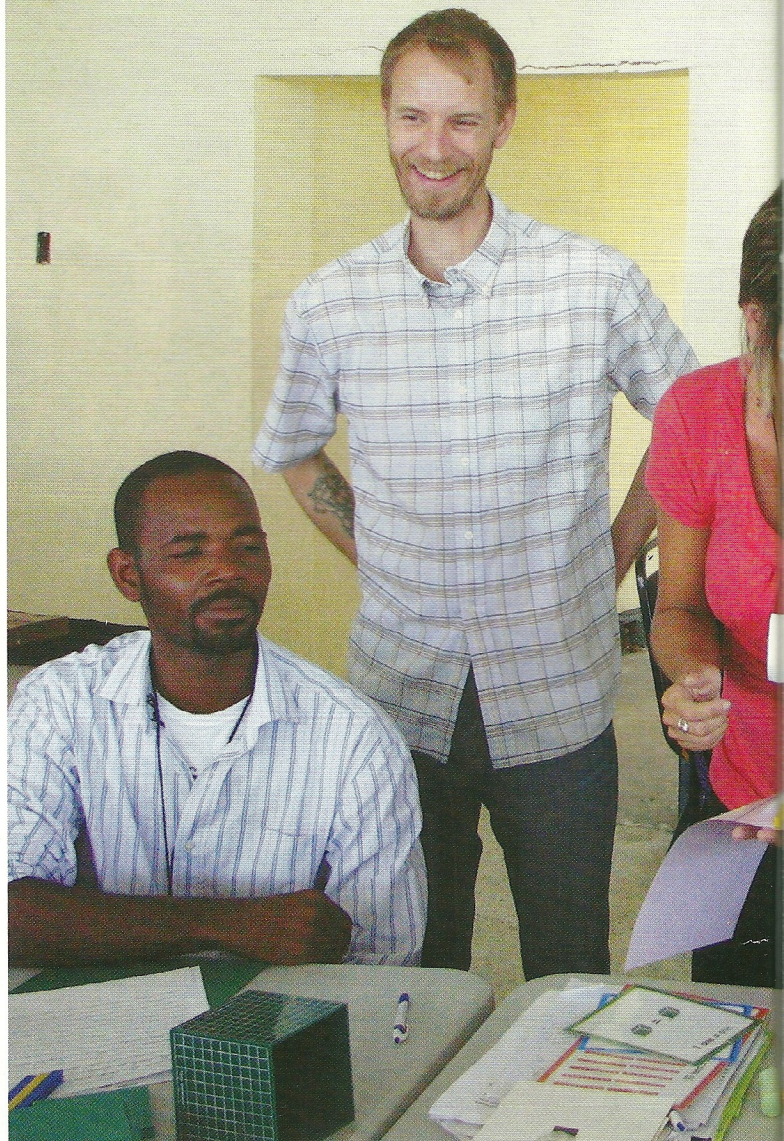
The group has changed over the years, with some teachers going back each year and others going only once. We have held the Teacher Summit each year since 2009, with the exception of 2011 when some safety concerns came up a week before we were set to depart.

Q: How did the idea develop?

The idea was developed at a local church in Holland (where I am a member), Calvary Christian Reformed Church. We had been looking for different ways to serve other countries, especially in ways that we would enrich the country.

Our church leaders believe that education is one of the most important aspects of helping a country and we partnered with organizations that have schools already functioning in Haiti, some of them Christian schools and others are community schools.

We want to focus more on development of the people and



Laurie Poll, principal of New Groningen Elementary in Zeeland, teaches Haitian teachers a math lesson as Erik Badger, back, of Haiti Partners translates.

Photo courtesy of Haiti Teacher Summit team members

the country instead of relief work. This seemed to be a perfect fit.

Q: What does the Haiti Teacher Summit entail?

I often describe the Haiti Teacher Summit as a teacher conference, "Haitian style" (This means it may not go exactly as we plan it.)

We gather a group of educators from the West Michigan area and travel to Haiti in July to work with two different Haitian organizations/schools. We bring lessons that we plan and prepare and then we present them to the Haitian teachers.

The topics and lessons have been more fitting and useful each year that we go as we learn how to better assist them. For many of the Haitian teachers, this is their only professional development they have for the year.

With the first group of Haitian teachers we work with in Haiti, we have almost 80 teachers from 8 schools. The teachers travel in to the conference for three days, by foot, by motorcycle, on the back of a pick-up truck or by a Tap Tap (a Haitian



vehicle that is like a cab with many people in it at once).

We always have a translator since the teachers speak Creole. There are typically 3 to 4 lessons taught in a day and the Summit runs 2.5 to 3 days.

After we finish those days, we move to another location in Haiti and teach the same thing again to a different group of about 20 teachers.

The teachers stay consistent in the schools with these organizations, so we all begin to look forward to our time together each year.

Q: How many years have you traveled with the group?

I have traveled to Haiti five times. Four of the trips have been the July Teacher Summit and in 2011 I had gone with our missions director from our church in January to actually see some schools while they were in session so that we could have a better understanding of what their classrooms and schools were really like.

I have been blessed to have had my oldest son, a current college sophomore, come with our group of educators twice and this summer my younger son, a current high school junior, will be joining us. Our family of four has all traveled to serve in Haiti many times in different locations.

Q: How do you prepare for the trip?

This trip is unique as we spend a good amount of time preparing. I co-lead the Summit with a teacher from Zeeland Christian and the preparation includes the coordination of the lodging, flights and then the whole group gathers several times to plan the lessons that will be taught each summer.

We all look at what has been taught in the past, what the Haitian teachers are looking to learn more about and then decide who will be teaching what subjects. After that we need to get some of the lessons sent out for translation and then gather all materials needed to teach the lessons.

Whatever we teach to them, we bring the supplies that they will need to teach it. There is also constant communication with the directors in Haiti to communicate what we are planning.

After all our school training is planned, we also bring school supplies for our Haitian teachers, along with small gifts for our cooks, drivers and hosts. There is much time that goes into each trip.

"We pray that we are making a difference in these teacher's lives, which will impact the education in Haiti for children of years to come. Along the way we are making life-long friends with teachers in another country."

Q: Are you planning to go this July as well? If so, who will be traveling with the group?

We are excited to return again in July. It will be my sixth trip to Haiti and we are all eager to see our Haitian friends again. Last year we had a group of 10 teachers that went and all but one are returning.

Most of us have gone more than three years so it is a very tight knit group who all have the same passion — to serve others. Of these 10 teachers, five are current Zeeland Public Schools educators.

Mark Gronevelt, Renee Schuur, Chad and Angela Lloyd, Laurie Poll, Sarah Genzink of Zeeland Christian, Char Greenlund of Hudsonville, Doug Bol of Allendale, Thea Gabrielse of Allendale Christian and Chip Schaddalee, a retired educator, will travel this year.

Q: In early March, you had two directors from Haiti Partners come to West Michigan to see the teachers that travel to Haiti teach in their own classrooms. How was this experience?

Benaja Antoine came from Port-au-Prince and Erik Badger, from Chicago, but works in Haiti much of the year. We saw several of our teachers and they were able to see what it looks like teaching in our classrooms.

This will help them follow up with the Haitian teachers in their classrooms. It also was an honor for us to host them and show them our community. Thankfully the snow was still here so we did some fun outdoor activities with them. They thought

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Top left, Teachers take an afternoon to tour some of the schools in Haiti with the Haitian school directors. They gather at a sign, which translates to "Education gives us hope!" From back left to right, Chip Schaddalee, Chad Lloyd, Angela Lloyd, Mark Gronevelt; middle row, Sarah Genzink, Char Greenlund, Renee Schuur, Laurie Poll, Doug Bol; front, Kristi Poll. Top right, one mode of transportation teachers use to travel in Haiti. Middle left, Jill Bouwman helps prepare a lunch of plantains with the local cook.

Center, Angela Lloyd takes a break from teaching math to give a thumbs up.

Bottom left, Sarah Genzink teaches a pre-kinder lesson to Haitian teachers.

Bottom middle, Renee Schuur with students in their school with no walls in the rural village of Chin-chiron.

Bottom right, a typical Haitian classroom.

Photos courtesy of Haiti Teacher Summit team members



Continued from previous page

it was pretty cold!

Q: What are the conditions like in Haiti — how does school life differ from that of the United States?

In many ways, they are worlds apart, and in other ways, they are still kids and teachers a lot like us.

Haiti is the poorest country in the western hemisphere, there is hunger, devastation and lack of basic supplies. The schools are typically made up of very minimal supplies, many don't even have walls or a roof. The basic classroom has wooden benches and cracked chalkboards.

It sure makes us think twice about complaining when our Internet is down or when the room temperature isn't just right.

The teaching in Haiti tends to be rote memorization and direct instruction.

There is a great need to learn more about collaboration amongst the students, critical thinking and classroom management. Each year we work to build that into the Haitian teachers so they can spread that learning to their students for years to come.

Q: Overall, how would you describe this experience?

This experience is like no other in my life. As our group sat on the ocean side one evening last year discussing how our day had gone and what the plans were for the next day one team member said, "We are part of an educational reform in another country." We all agreed.

We pray that we are making a difference in these teacher's lives, which will impact the education in Haiti for children of years to come. Along the way we are making life-long friends with teachers in another country. Once you have been there and you see it, you hear it, you smell it and taste it ... your heart is touched.



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