



**The Children's Academy and Learning Center**  
*Preparing and inspiring changemakers*

Building on decades of work in leadership and education, we opened the Children's Academy and Learning Center in September 2012 with 25 three-year-old children. It's located in the mountains ten miles south of Port-au-Prince in a rural community called Bawosya. John Engle, the Co-Founder/Director of Haiti Partners, and his wife Merline, a native of Haiti, have lived in the community for most of 20 years.

Beginning in 2010, John, Merline, and Alex Myril met regularly with community members, to plan the school we wanted for our community. We made decisions together ranging from architectural design to determining values, mission and the vision for the school. Today, there are 216 students between the ages of three and nine.

Along with a nominal fee, **parents give four service hours per week as their contribution to their child's schooling.**

In addition to providing an excellent education, the Children's Academy is a working model of school-based community development. Students learn locally relevant skills, like permaculture gardening, which includes using composting latrines. Parents participate in adult education where they're learning about positive discipline with their children, good hygiene, nutrition, preventative health and strategies to end violence against women and girls. They participate in community savings and loan groups.

Partner organizations support the community as well. There's a clinic in the school staffed by a Haitian physician, dentist and other qualified staff to provide care for students and the community. In the afternoons, local youth take language, music, entrepreneurship and vocational classes, as well as participate in sports such as soccer and basketball.

This Children's Academy has a social business making handmade paper from natural fibers found on the mountain. From the paper, we make greeting cards and paper art for sale internationally. Learn more at <https://haitipartners.org/childrens-academy/>

The Children's Academy mission is to prepare and inspire changemakers. The core values taught at the school are:

- 1) *Good Character – Strive to always be respectful, honest and wise,*
- 2) *Sense of Purpose – Work to discover and realize your unique contribution to the world,*
- 3) *Sustainability – Think, design, act with future generations in mind,*
- 4) *Community – Move forward together with love, compassion and joy.*

*Our vision is to create a laboratory for learning, entrepreneurship, and innovation.*

The Children's Academy is complemented by a network of six *partner schools* which benefit from its model practices. Between the Children's Academy and the partner schools, Haiti Partners impacts the lives of over 1200 students each day.

## My Haiti Story – John Engle

It was 1991, I was 26 and a Sales Manager for Panasonic working out of a Chicago office. I had grown up in Hershey, Pennsylvania. I discovered at a young age that I lived in a bubble and that most people in the world didn't have the opportunities that I did. For instance, when I was ten, my family received two Vietnamese refugees who escaped after the Vietnam war. Their stories about death and destruction and poverty broke my heart.

I was on track for a promising career, yet I was coming up short on meaning so I made a 2-year commitment to a small non-profit supporting education in Haiti. Five months after I moved to Haiti, their first democratically elected president was violently overthrown. I witnessed horrible things. I also witnessed unbelievable determination among Haitians struggling for freedom and an end to their oppression. Having drawn so much inspiration from my Haitian colleagues and finding their history so compelling, I ended up staying longer than two years and eventually committed my life to walking beside the Haitian people. In 2003 I met my wife, Merline, and we married in 2004. We have two children ages ten and twelve.

Nearly 25 years ago, soon after moving into a mountain community overlooking Port-au-Prince, I sat with seven-year-old twins Djeff and Ricardo and their father, Joel. In my limited Creole I asked Djeff and Ricardo to be my language teachers. With a grin Joel grabbed a tree branch and started stripping off the leaves, turning it into a whip. He pointed it at me then giggled as he handed it to his sons, proclaiming, "If there's going to be education, there has to be punishment."

Haiti is stuck. The education system is stuck. Moments like this one, with Joel and his sons, and countless others over the years have taught me that for progress to happen, there first must be a fundamental shift in how Haitians view education and leadership.

It's not just about helping children learn to read and write, to memorize and recite. Traditional education in Haiti fails to inspire. We need education that creates joy and innovation, that helps children to develop strong values like empathy, integrity, and respect for one another. An education that will help students to discover their full potential. We need schools that engage parents and community members in lifelong learning.

But schools like this aren't built overnight, and in Haiti, a country whose identity has been forged through the brutality and exploitation of colonization and slavery, there is no such thing as a quick fix. Haiti's history continues to plague almost every facet of life - from education, to governance, to interpersonal relationships. The lineage must be broken and change must happen, but it will happen slowly.

After many years of having thousands of teachers and leaders go through our seminars to learn a more collaborative approach to education and leadership, it became clear that while the impact was very positive, we needed a different strategy to get even more traction. Seven years ago my wife Merline and other co-workers and I determined we had to narrow our focus. We had to get granular so we started exploring with members in our community the possibility of starting a school. With monthly meetings, we built shared vision which included a desire to create a model that can inspire others not just around the country, but around the world.

We hope what we've begun at Children's Academy is part of that change, we hope it can inspire others, and we hope you will be inspired by the stories of the students at Children's Academy. We hope you'll stay with us toward realizing this dream of a school that equips children to be changemakers, a school that transforms a community and inspires other schools in Haiti and maybe even around the world.