



Spring 2011

## Hope for Haiti

Celeste Huttes

*Illinois Wesleyan University*, [iwumag@iwu.edu](mailto:iwumag@iwu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag>

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Huttes, Celeste (2011) "Hope for Haiti," *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, 2002-2017*: Vol. 20 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag/vol20/iss1/2>

This is a PDF version of an article that originally appeared in the printed Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, a quarterly periodical published by Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact [iwumag@iwu.edu](mailto:iwumag@iwu.edu).

©Copyright is owned by the University and/or the author of this document.

# Hope for Haiti

## Sharing a commitment to help, alumni discover the resilience of an impoverished nation.

Stories by CELESTE HUTTES

In the days and weeks following a powerful earthquake and tsunami that devastated Japan on March 11, the world watched as the island nation began the slow road to recovery. It is a struggle familiar to Haitians, who have seen firsthand how a natural disaster of this scale can devastate a nation.

On January 12, 2010, a 7.0-magnitude earthquake struck near the capital of Port au Prince, Haiti, killing an estimated 230,000, injuring as many as 300,000 and leaving more than 1 million homeless.

Just as Japan will need years to rebuild itself, Haiti continues to face monumental struggles.

For some Illinois Wesleyan graduates, Haiti was a headline in their lives even before the earthquake put the small country in the global spotlight. For these alumni, the earthquake underscored the need for assistance in the poorest nation in the Western hemisphere. The IWU alumni offering their help in Haiti have discovered that they gain as much as they give when they open their hearts to a people in need.

### Answering the Call

"From being down there you would not believe when you look in their eyes how strong they are and how much hope they have," Paul Halvorsen '91 says of Haiti's people.

Halvorsen has traveled to the island three times since 2008 as a team leader for the Bloomington-based Haitian Christian Ministries. He plans to return again this spring.

While the earthquake raised awareness of Haiti last year, Halvorsen believes "it will take everybody's efforts every year to make a difference there."

"Sometimes it seems what little progress they make gets wiped out by natural disaster," he says, noting that, two years prior to the earthquake, a tropical storm and three hurricanes all struck Haiti within four weeks, leaving 800,000 in need of humanitarian aid.

Natural disasters are not Haiti's only problem. Political instability and violence are woven into its history. "They have a corrupt government," says Halvorsen. "It's not progressive and not doing much for the people." An estimated 80 percent of the Haitian population lives below the poverty line. More than half are in abject poverty.

"They need a lot of help," Halvorsen says, "so many of us have made a long-term commitment to keep going." Various teams from Haitian Christian Ministries travel to Haiti regularly for shorter mission trips, providing medical, educational and construction assistance.

"I knew once I went, I would be hooked on going down — and I am," says Halvorsen, who lives in Normal with his wife, Angie, and their three children. He first learned about the need in Haiti through family and friends who've done mission work there for years.



Haitian men clear rubble from a devastating 7.0-magnitude earthquake that struck the island nation last year. (Photo by U.S. Navy)



Since 2008, Paul Halvorsen has traveled yearly to Haiti to lead construction and maintenance projects. "You can't just give handouts — people want to work and do things on their own," he says.

With upcoming trips planned for April and again in January, Halvorsen says that Haiti's extreme distress calls him back. "Some Haitians have to struggle just to have enough food every day. There is such a great need for life's basic necessities."

Some might be discouraged by this reality, but Halvorsen is inspired by Haiti's people and their resilience. "It's not all gloom and doom. The people are amazing. They are very happy with so little." He also appreciates the pace of Haitian culture. "There is no rat race in Haiti — they have time for each other."

In Pillatre, a small town near the major city of Cap-Haitien, Halvorsen leads construction and maintenance projects, applying his background as owner of SMF Inc., a metal manufacturer in Minonk, Ill. As a result of his and others' efforts on behalf of Haitian Christian Ministries, a new school, medical clinic and 900-seat church now serve the community. The group plans to duplicate this successful model in nearby towns.

"We're careful not to do what they can do for themselves — that would be insulting," Halvorsen says. "We do things they don't have the tools or knowledge for, and then we teach them how to do it." For example, after installing a 50-station wireless computer lab, the volunteers trained a local instructor so he, in turn, could teach students to do basic diagnostics themselves.

In keeping with this philosophy, Haitian Christian Ministries hires local workers to do most of the construction and maintenance work, while providing help with financing and specialized skills like electrical wiring.

"You can't just give handouts — people want to work and do things on their own," says Halvorsen. "Their thirst for knowledge is awesome. They want to become educated and do well for themselves and their families. That's the other side of Haiti you don't always hear about."

### Hope, Love and Basketball

It was his love of basketball, and a nudge from his wife, Sarah, that first brought Mark Aubry '95 to Haiti.

The seeds were planted in 2009, when Sarah led a soccer camp in Pillatre, Haiti, while the church group she was with built an outdoor basketball court. A minister, and the director of the school where the court had been built, remarked that his people would like to learn "American basketball." Sarah immediately thought of Mark, a standout Titan basketball player who spent 10 years leading basketball camps for fifth- to eighth-grade boys and girls.

Mark — an adjunct business professor at IWU, managing director of two investment firms and father of three — quickly embraced the idea of sharing his passion for the sport with Haiti's young people by starting a basketball camp there.

Before even planning such a camp, he and Sarah realized that he would need to equip participants with the necessities to play. The couple and Mark's cousin, Adam Provance, founded Hoops for Haiti, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to collecting used athletic shoes, basketballs and jerseys for camp participants. "Our goal was to have a pair of shoes for every kid if we could," Mark says.

As word of the mission of “hope and love through basketball” spread, equipment donations poured in from across the country. Aubry and his team were able to ship roughly 600 pairs of basketball shoes, 1,200 articles of clothing, hundreds of basketballs and 6,000 granola bars for their first camp in Haiti in March 2010.

The camp was a hit, drawing more than 500 young men and women. However, it hit an unexpected snag when word spread about the free shoes and jerseys intended for camp participants. “By 10 a.m. on the first day, half of the community had shown up and was asking for clothes and shoes,” says Aubry.

The experience, while frustrating, proved to be a lesson in the art of helping. For his next trip to Haiti, scheduled for this May, Aubry is planning a different approach.



Mark Aubry, front row left, poses with volunteers and participants at a basketball camp hosted by Hoops for Haiti. Aubry co-founded the not-for-profit organization, which held its first camp in Pillatre, Haiti, last year.

“We’re still going to provide shoes and uniforms to the campers, as long as people continue to donate. But instead of us going in and saying, ‘Here’s what you should do,’ we’ll ask, ‘What do you really need?’ The key is getting local people engaged.

“We could easily fall into that trap of fostering a learned helplessness,” Aubry continues. “It’s important to be part of a group that understands the long-term impact of programs. We need to be clear about what our strategic vision is.”

His team will meet with community leaders to identify their most pressing needs — and of course, shoot some hoops. In the future, Aubry will specifically target 18- to 25-year-olds so they, in turn, can teach the younger set. “We want to encourage young people to be leaders,” he says.

“Basketball gets us into the community — it’s an opportunity to get young folks in and find out what they dream about,” says Aubry.

With seeds planted through the “listening tour,” Hoops for Haiti hopes to expand its mission beyond the courts. Aubry envisions one day providing critical assistance in areas such as education, construction and micro-lending.

“You can make a small loan that allows a mother to buy a cow and sell the milk — and maybe send her child to school,” he says. “The objective is to help them help themselves, but they need to be given opportunities.”

And as the group’s vision expands, so does its geographic reach. Aubry is currently working on a trip to Zambia, Africa. Yet, even as the not-for-profit morphs into “Beyond Hoops International,” basketball will remain at the heart of what it does.

“I really have a passion for the game of basketball,” says Aubry. “It’s great to use something you love to make an impact.”

### Indelible Impressions

Even for Haiti’s healthy, life is often a struggle. With poor living conditions and a lack of basic nutrition and medical care, one can only imagine how the sick must suffer. Medical missionaries like Dan O’Brien ’02 hope to ease that suffering one person at a time.

“I always wanted to do mission trips — that’s one of the reasons I became a doctor,” says O’Brien, who practices internal medicine and pediatrics in Metamora, Ill., and works with three area hospitals.

Through the Peoria-based not-for-profit Friends of the Children of Haiti (FOTCOH), O'Brien spent two weeks in May 2010 as part of a team ministering to the ill and injured in Cyvadier, about 40 miles from Port au Prince.

In Cyvadier, FOTCOH operates a 6,000-square-foot medical clinic, complete with exam and surgical areas, a pharmacy and living space for the teams of doctors, nurses and non-medical volunteers who travel there several times a year.



Dan O'Brien (above left) volunteered his medical skills at a clinic operated by the Friends of the Children of Haiti. Hundreds stood in line each morning to be treated. "Every day, you have a chance to save someone's life," he says.

sickened an estimated 779,000 Haitians.

"Simple diseases like high blood pressure are killing people," says O'Brien. "Every day, you have a chance to save someone's life — sometimes with something as simple as a bottle of penicillin."

The team was able to perform basic surgeries at the FOTCOH clinic, treating tumors, gall bladders, cancers and hernias. However, "some of the injuries were unbelievable," says O'Brien. He recalls a teenage boy who came to the clinic with a complex leg fracture — a painful reminder of the earthquake that struck in January 2010.

"There is no orthopedic surgeon on the island," says O'Brien, "so this boy will never walk right again unless he can figure out a way to get to the States."

Accompanying O'Brien on the trip was his wife, Bethany (VonBehren) O'Brien '01, who is an attorney. As a non-medical volunteer, Bethany helped with housekeeping and laundry, greeted patients, handled paperwork and even learned a bit of Creole.

"It was great — I got to see every person who came through," she says. And some of them left indelible impressions.

"There is no physician for miles ... and a lot of the people don't have shoes." She recalls an elderly woman who hobbled into the clinic, using an old golf club for a cane, after a two-day walk across the mountains to get there. "Her feet were just torn up — dirty, calloused, scratched and bleeding." Bethany happily handed over her own flip-flops to help ease the woman's return journey.

Another woman arrived at the clinic with four young children in tow, and then passed out while waiting in line. She was loaded into the "ambulance" — a wheelbarrow pushed by a gentleman making siren-like sounds to clear a path through the crowd. As the mother received medical attention, Bethany tried to put the children at ease.

As he pulled up to the clinic that first day, O'Brien saw about 200 people, from newborns to the elderly, waiting in the hot sun for the clinic to open its doors. But what surprised him most was the way the people waited.

"It was quite a sight. ... People had been camping there a couple days, but there was no pushing or shoving — no complaints," he says. "The people were so appreciative and so patient."

During the two-week trip, the team saw approximately 3,000 patients.

Many of the children suffered from malnutrition (in fact, one in every five Haitian children dies of malnutrition, dehydration and diarrhea). Other youngsters came to the clinic with burns resulting from the common practice of cooking outdoors over open fires.

Since O'Brien's trip, a cholera epidemic, spread through contaminated food and water, has

"The kids looked scared and worried, so I gave them some candy and we sang songs and played games. ... I told them 'mama is okay' and they stopped worrying so much."

Often, as she gave out little pieces of candy to children at the clinic, Bethany realized that it was probably the first thing they had eaten in a day or two. "I saw how little people have and how grateful they are for anything," she says. "I worried before we went because I don't have any medical knowledge and thought I didn't have anything to offer these people, but then I saw that they need everything."

The couple, who plan to return to Haiti next year, hope to spark continued awareness of the need for assistance — and the difference one person can make.

"They may not be in the news anymore, but they were hurting before the earthquake and they're hurting more after it," says Dan. "Don't forget about them."