



April, 2013

On a sunny, warm Thursday morning the sounds of a hundred jubilant kids rose above the soft breeze. A freshly cut ribbon, which laid trampled on the ground, had signaled the opening of the largest playground in Haiti. With excited shouts, chatter, and laughter the children of Saline-Mayette were exploring their new playground at breakneck speed. Suddenly, it became quiet, and the playing stopped. The children's focus seemed to be on our team which walked toward the two beat-up pick-up trucks that would transport us for the last time over the five miles of rocky, wanna-be roads to the mission facility where we were staying. It was our final parting from these kids with whom we had interacted so joyfully for six days. As they watched us climb into the backs of the trucks their looks of contemplation communicated an understanding that they would not see us again. Several approached the trucks. Then two of the girls, aged 7 or so, unhesitatingly climbed up. They seemed determined to go with us. A Haitian man gently coaxed them down. There were tears in the eyes of some of our team as the trucks pulled away. We had definitely connected with these kids, and they with us.

It was what our host, the Northwest Haiti Christian Mission, had hoped for; that we would bring the gift of our lives as well as the gift of the playground. In so doing, they were sure that we would receive back from these wonderful children the only thing they could give, their love and affection. As we left, I reflected on the scripture verse God put on my heart when my son Brian and I made the decision to volunteer for this project. It is 3rd John, verses 5-6. Verse 5, it seemed, was our team's part, which says, "Beloved, you are acting faithfully in whatever you accomplish for the brethren, and especially when they are strangers." Verse 6 seemed to be the kids' response when it says, "...you will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God." They certainly sent us home with our hearts overflowing.

The scene I've just described was a perfect way to end this challenging project. The enormous playground we built was the largest of the 280 playgrounds Kids Around the World has installed around the globe. Approximately 170 holes were dug with shovels and pick axes to accommodate all the posts and play features. Our team of 21 American men and women along with a dozen Haitian men had seven days to complete the project, but we were able to do it in just four. This, despite a hot Caribbean sun that daily served up 85-90 degree temperatures. While the heat and other physical demands of this vast rural region tested our resolve, our team worked very well together. At nightly team meetings we spent time in worship, Bible study and sharing our thoughts of the day's experiences. This had a unifying effect and created great friendships. It also helped us keep the focus off ourselves and on those we came to serve - the villagers, the Mission, and especially the kids.

Haiti is the poorest country and has the highest child mortality rate (non-survival past five years) in the Western Hemisphere. The rural northwest is the poorest region of Haiti, with an average daily income of around \$1.00 per day. Residents of this region eke out a living through limited agriculture affected by deforestation and soil erosion. On our first trip to the playground site we traveled through the humble market area which was densely packed with people. Here merchants in stick constructed shelters peddled miscellaneous food and clothing items plus a few other types of goods (photo left). The main method of transporting goods and people to market is by donkey. Seeing a corral of many neatly organized rows of donkeys made me think humorously of a shopping center parking lot (photo right).



While a majority of Haitians would call themselves Christians, the practice of voodoo is prevalent in Haitian society. Every day we passed the home of the local witchdoctor. A red rag was tied to a tree on the property, the color of which informed of the types of maladies and spells he would address. Still, there was no visible hostility aimed at us. Our engagement with the Haitian children and adults surrounding the orphanage was one of mutual friendliness and appreciation.

I want to introduce to you some of the Haitian friends who warmed our hearts. Meet Teika and her cousin. Only four years old, they truly are the social butterflies of their school. Their goal was to let every one of our team pick them up and carry them around. It was common to see a team member working one-handed because in his other arm was one of the girls.

Kids loved to line up for photos. The shoots were never complete until they crowded around the digital camera to see an instant image of themselves. This stirred up oohs, aahs, and lots of giggling. Adults also invited us to photograph them by calling out, "FOTO, FOTO!"

These young mothers were happy to oblige.





These teenaged girls asked us to take their picture. Personally, I think they had more interest in Brian's attention. The Haitian men were a great addition to our team. They did much of the digging. They



also were adept at mixing and applying the concrete. The Haitians were paid by the Mission for their labor. A sense of ownership and pride was the result among these hard workers.

The dedication of the playground is always the most satisfying part of a build. Our team arrived early on "Dedication Day" to clean up the site and attach streamers and balloons to the playground. Many children and adults from the orphanage, school, and village gathered to wait for the ribbon cutting. The children sang for us in their native French Creole language. Then, a few from our team made brief comments with the help of a translator. One guy in particular emphasized that the gift of the playground was being given in the name of



Jesus Christ. He told them of God's profound love, of Christ's sacrifice on the cross and of the resurrection, that by trusting Jesus they receive forgiveness of sins, the presence of

God in their lives, and eternal life. The crowd listened intently. Finally, the ribbon was cut and the children swarmed onto the playground. My favorite memory will be what seemed like an unending "conveyor belt" of kids, mostly in groups of three or four clutching each other and going down the popular roller slide smiling, laughing or squealing their approval. Never had they seen anything remotely like a modern playground. The best comparison I can make would be similar to that of a kid's first trip to Disney World.

After such a moving dedication and our departure from Saline Mayette, one might think everything afterwards would be anticlimactic, but there was another incredible experience awaiting some of us. The team visited the Northwest Haiti Christian Mission's main facility in St. Louis de Nord on the north coast. Here they operate another orphanage, a ministry to children with severe disabilities, a live-in ministry for the aged, a jail ministry, and a food program providing thousands of meals a week. We had the privilege of participating in some of these ministries.

The highlight of our time was when Brian and I, along with several others, visited the local jail. We had learned through the Mission that prisoners might not eat unless someone from the outside brings food to them. We determined to merge a lot of the snack bars and food items we had brought to Haiti and take these to the jail. There were three inmates in one dark and dingy cell. They eagerly accepted the food. Through our translator, we shared the good news of the true freedom that is in Christ for all who put their faith in Him. In a wonderfully sacred moment, all three prayed to God, surrendering to Christ. One of the inmates asked for a Bible, which the Mission was glad to supply.

Our time in Haiti had come to an end. We left St. Louis de Nord at midnight on Friday to ride the bus back to Port-au-Prince for our morning flight back to the States. It gave time to reflect on the amazing experiences of the trip. As I recalled the prayer concerns we shared with many, it was clear that God had answered them all. Our desire to be an encouragement, to connect in Christ's love to the kids, the unity of our team, adjusting to the physical demands, safety, and having to depend on God to be in the details, all summarize His faithfulness toward us.

My thoughts returned to the dedication a couple days earlier. While the kids enthusiastically played on their new playground, one of the Haitian men who helped in the build came up to me. He had a smile that radiated despite the absence of a few teeth. He summed everything up simply, but perfectly. Grabbing both my hands in his, he gestured to the children on the playground and excitedly exclaimed in his nearly non-existent English, "Happy!" "Big happy!" In my mind our entire experience of serving in Haiti echoes this precious Haitian's words.

Brian and I are grateful for the involvement and support from those who partnered with us to undertake this project. We greatly appreciate the many prayers that sustained us. Blessings to all!

Sincerely,
Dave Mogle



A Note from Brian

For my first mission trip outside of North America I couldn't have been anymore blessed than I was that week. The experiences had, relationships made, and lives changed during my time there will forever be engraved in the spirits of both the children and me alike. I am very grateful for all who assisted in making this trip possible through financial support and prayer. From what first seemed like an insurmountable task led to a miraculous record-time completion, leaving our team with plenty of time to play with the children and minister to the Haitians. Now the children of the Saline Mayette orphanage can safely say that they have the largest playground in Haiti and I am humbled to have been included in that.

A piece of us shall always remain at that playground in Haiti; this will continue to spread a message of hope for these children. Again, I appreciate all who partnered with us in ways that contributed to a very successful mission trip.

Mark 9:36-37 Jesus reached for a little child, placed him among the Twelve, and embraced him. Then he said, "Whoever welcomes one of these children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me isn't actually welcoming me but rather the one who sent me."

God bless,

Brian Mogle

