

Lècol Pa Nou: Our School

N e w s l e t t e r

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Our Story

The initiative began in August 1999 when Michigan residents, Pierre Balthazar and David Smith visited Pierre's relatives in Port-Au-Prince.

His brother, Line Balthazar, arranged a meeting with residents of Pichon who were asked, "How would you improve in your village?" and "How could a few people in the United States and Canada help you to achieve that goal?" After several hours of conversation, it became clear: the residents of Pichon wanted a school for their children.

This began a process of collaboration that, by May 2003, had grown to serve 168 students from pre-school to second grade. Third grade was added in September 2003 and seven teachers have been locally recruited and trained.

A modest structure provides classroom space and the children here have begun their basic education. A storage shed, sanitary facilities and a cistern have also been constructed to support the school.

Their Story

Pichon is a remote village in southeast Haiti. There is no electricity, no telephone service, no health clinic and little potable water. It is isolated even from the rest of Haiti by rugged mountains and underdeveloped roads. Haiti, the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, has an estimated 6.8 million inhabitants whose average monthly income is less than \$20. The consequences of this poverty throughout Haiti and in Pichon are distressing. Average life expectancy is 57 years old and the child mortality rate is 70%.





Photos by: David L. Smith

A Different Kind of Summer Vacation

Nick Rogell

Why did I go to Haiti for my summer vacation? Well, to begin with, it wasn't a vacation. Not your typical vacation anyway.

The Beginning

One morning, during the fall of 2002, at Sunday school is how my journey began. David Smith, another member of the class that I attend was there, too. He brought with him a binder full of pictures. He told me they were from Haiti. I wasn't too sure what David's pictures were going to look like, or why David would even want to go to Haiti.

As I opened the binder, I stared at the postcard-like pictures. The only thing missing was the "Greetings from Hawaii" printed across the bottom. Only they weren't from Hawaii.

The kids faces in the pictures were so deep. Just the looks on their faces drew me in. I'm pretty sure it was those pictures that sparked my interest in Haiti.

As I looked at the pictures, David explained that he and another friend, Pierre Balthazar, had started a service

project in Haiti about four years ago. Since then, they have been traveling to Haiti, to a village called Pichon, where they have offered to help the townspeople provide an education for the children. David and Pierre have raised money to pay to hire teachers. The townspeople built the school. David said that on their trips to Pichon, he and Pierre are establishing relationships with the community. The only group, David said, that they hadn't yet been able to establish bonds with were the children. That gave me an idea. What if I went to Haiti with David and Pierre, brought some basketballs, and taught the kids how to play?

Second thoughts

As the trip drew nearer and nearer, hardly any of the advice I received helped to ease my nerves. I didn't think about it at the time but all the negative information I was hearing came from people who had never actually been to Haiti. When I went to get my immunization shots for the trip, the lady at the health department sat my mom and me down and went through a packet of information, cautions and warnings of what to watch out for and what not to do.

After maybe half an hour of "Don't touch any animals, don't eat the food, watch out for roving bands of thieves walking down the street..." my mom was actually in tears. Luckily, my dad saved the day and somehow convinced my mom that the risks were low compared to the benefits, and in any case, I would be safe with Pierre and David.

Images of Haiti

By the time we touched down in Haiti it was sometime in the middle of the afternoon. After I unpacked my stuff and got situated, I took out my video camera and walked around the house. Pierre took Jaye and me out onto the street so I could video tape some people.

We walked outside the gates. Directly across the street was a family living in a vacant lot with a few trees and a broken down car in the middle of the yard. We walked up to them and Pierre helped to introduce us. Since he already knew Creole he acted as a translator during the week. All the kids ran up to us, smiling. They were a little camera shy at first but still very friendly.

As we were going down the street, I couldn't believe some of the things I

saw. Stray dogs barking while kids threw rocks at them. Music on everywhere, all the time. Cows just walking around in the middle of the street. Small, one room shacks for large families living next door to seemingly untouchable, million dollar houses surrounded by 15 foot high walls, all with giant red gates.

This was incredible. I think what made the biggest impression on me were the faces of people as they walked by. They were pretty intimidating, as if they were concentrating on something really hard or just having a bad day because they looked a little mad. However, something as small as a smile and a "Bonjour!" would brighten up their faces in an instant, as they would return the greeting.

A Connection

Near the middle of the week, I finally got to play basketball. It turns out that they already had a hoop in the middle of the village. Well, it wasn't quite like the real thing. The hoop was, maybe, eight and a half feet off the ground with no net. And the backboard reminded me of a piece of cardboard taken from a pizza box,

only made of wood. Pierre said a few words to a kid and he ran inside a small house and seconds later he was back with a basketball. The kid, who was probably 16 or 17, gathered around four other kids.

So far, I had not said a single word since I got on the dirt court, that was in the middle of the street, but already, was just about to play three-on-three. As we started it took me a minute to realize that their rules were just a little bit different than ours but it was the same idea. Since their specialty is soccer, not basketball, they weren't very good but it was fun, anyway. A few minutes into our game, a crowd started to form, which got bigger and bigger as the game went on. I thought it was kind of funny that there were, like, 50 people or more standing around the court just watching us play basketball.

"Our School"

Now it was time to go to Pichon, a small village outside of Belle-Anse. This was the reason we went to Haiti. There is an elementary school there called Lecole Pa Nou (Our School) that David and Pierre helped to start four years ago, so we were going to

go there to have a meeting with the teachers and townspeople and to just see how they were doing.

This was a community with no electricity, and no clean water. To me it seemed like the whole village revolved around the kids. Education was so important to them. The first meeting was with the principal and some other teachers. They were just saying thank you and how much they appreciated what we were doing. I remember seeing the principal trying to hold back his tears. They were so grateful towards us.

A Change in Perspective

During one of the other meetings with the parents and townspeople, one of the women there was encouraged by some of the men to speak up and share input. Remember, this is a culture where the women are expected to keep their mouths shut, and their main jobs are to cook and clean. So, to see men actually wanting a woman to share her voice in a conversation was a very positive sign.

Near the end of the week, as we were driving back to Port au Prince, I was thinking to myself that this week was the most amazing week of my life. After all the warnings and worry, the scariest moment I had was when I tried to kill a spider. Well, actually I got Pierre to kill a spider for me because there was no way I was going to touch it. It was the size of my face and it was in my room! The rest of my stay was relatively calm, considering everyday was packed with new sights and new realizations.

My trip to Haiti helped me discover that we are so lucky. I know you have heard that many times in your life but the fact is it's true. The things we take for granted are the same things that people in Haiti pray to attain.

No, this wasn't atypical vacation, but I know it was the best experience I have ever been a part of, and I would give anything to do it again.

Nick Rogell is a junior at Holt High School in Holt, MI.



Photo by: David L. Smith

Fundraiser: Card Sale

On December 6, members of the Pichon Project packed up their boxes and headed down to Peace Education Center, in East Lansing, MI to sell a little slice of Pichon, Haiti to some folks in Michigan.

Piere Balthazar and Lisa McGiveron took part in the Center's Alternative Holiday sale for the fourth year in a row. This time, in addition to artwork from Haiti, the group sold greeting cards that feature artwork from the children of Pichon and photographs of the village, the school, and Haiti and contain information about the project on each card.

"The cards are very beautiful, they're printed on very good card-stock and the colors just jump out at you," said Heather Banks, a new member to the group.

The cards come eight to a pack, including envelopes, and cost \$5 per pack.

"The cards aren't specific to any season, " said Balthazar, "And the best part is that they're blank inside so they can be used as Christmas cards, thank-you cards, all those things."

The goal was to raise money for the Project's yearly operating budget for the project. The group raised only \$250.00, but this was only the group's first card sale.

"We're still experimenting with fund-raising ideas," said David Smith "Hopefully, we can raise enough money to reach our operating fund's needs with just the card sale."

"What's really good about the card sale is that we were able to establish some wonderful contacts and references for the project," said McGiveron. "We would like to thank the Peace Education Center for the wonderful opportunity to raise funds for our project and to spread the word about Pichon."

For more information contact us at:
Pichonfriends@sbcglobal.net

Help us raise funds for the Project. Buy a pack of cards today, here's how:

Yes, I want to order ____ packs of 8 cards (with envelopes) for \$5.00/pack

Subtotal: _____ + Shipping = \$1.00 per pack

Total: _____

I am paying by :

Money Order _____

Check _____ payable to Peace Education Center

Please send my receipt and my cards to the following address:



Please send the order form along with payment to:
Haiti Project c/o David Smith
453 Kensington
East Lansing, MI 48823