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A publication of  
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## THROUGH TWINNING WITH HAITI

# A World of Sharing & Caring Opens Up to American Travelers



Rachel and Rich Higgins with parishioners of Notre Dame de Lourdes.

By RICH and RACHEL HIGGINS  
Parishioners of St. Mark the Evangelist

At St. Marks, we often say: you really can't find two more opposite groups of people or places than our twinned parish of Notre Dame de Lourdes in Port-au-Prince and our parish in Westbrook, Connecticut.

Nevertheless, the connection between the two is real and runs very deep. We have learned many lessons from our two trips to Haiti.

Initially we had some fears about the dangers of traveling to Haiti. But Jesus commands us to be not afraid, so we felt that, if this was God's will for us, then we should forget our worldly fears and trust in Him. We also wondered whether our money would be better used as a direct donation to Haiti instead of paying for our visit. But then we were reminded of our twinning covenant, which says, among other things, that we will visit at least once a year. A twinning relationship is about so much more than sending money.

We first made it to Haiti in 2008. Our initial experience with our twin was at a Sunday Mass, when we heard the most uplifting choir we had ever heard! After that same service, we met many of the 40 students who St. Mark sponsors to go to school. The biggest challenge was communicating without a common language.

When we went back three years later, in the fall of 2011, the first thing we noticed as we entered the church was the painting of the dual icons of Our Lady of Lourdes and St. Mark, which our church in Connecticut had given as a gift three years before. The painting is now mounted on the altar to serve as a reminder to the Haitians of their sisters and brothers in Westbrook.

During this visit, priests and others facilitated our discussions with parishioners and students. Some of the scholarship students squeezed into a vehicle with us to take us to see their schools. That ride was a real ice-breaker for everyone and made our next meeting after Mass on Sunday relaxed and fun. The students

and their parents gathered and greeted us with songs, words of thanks, handshakes, hugs and smiles all around. They told us how much they appreciated the Christmas cards we gave them from St. Marks CCD students, hand-decorated with greetings in Creole.

Despite all the frustration and difficulty in Haiti due to poor housing and sanitation and extreme poverty, we were witnessing our twin parishioners holding up their heads, praising God for the good things in life, and simply trying to move forward day by day. We were witnessing what we have acknowledged: every human has dignity given by God.

If we truly want to stand in solidarity with our Haitian brothers and sisters, we can certainly help them with money, prayers and projects, but, even more than that, we can offer human connection, someone to listen to their stories so they know they are not forgotten in a harsh and unfair world. When we visit, we become more than a donor to them. We show personal interest, and we honor them as fellow pilgrims who need love and encouragement to face each new and difficult day.

After our parish visits to Haiti, it has been impossible not to return with a different perspective on life. This was especially true for the teenagers who came with us and their parents for last November's trip. They were particularly affected by the connections with our Haitian sisters and brothers; we believe the experience will be a powerful antidote to the self-absorbed world around them. We hope that more young people will accompany us to Port-au-Prince in the future, particularly since we've learned that language differences are no barrier among friends.

St. Mark's twinning connection with Haiti through Notre Dame de Lourdes has been uniquely valuable as a church project, bringing together two very different cultures that communicate through love, mutual respect and the celebration of the Mass. We share in the one Eucharist, pray in unity with one another and touch one another's lives in deep and lasting ways.



A staff member at Sr. Ann Weller Clinic (standing at center) speaks to mothers about health risks to their children.

## OUTREACH COLLABORATES WITH HAITI'S HEALTH MINISTRY Vaccination Program Reaches 25,000 in Christ Roi Community

By ANNA DeBIASI • Development Director

Outreach to Haiti collaborated this spring with the Haitian government and U.S. officials to vaccinate more than 25,000 children in the Christ Roi community of Port-au-Prince.

Because of Outreach's long-standing relationship with the community, the Haitian government approached us to help reach children, from infancy to age 9. The staff at Outreach's Sr. Ann Weller Clinic were happy to help.

Haitian and U.S. officials together launched the nationwide vaccination campaign that seeks to curb or prevent the spread of infectious diseases. The U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services, Kathleen Sebelius, along with the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and international providers, helped the Haitian government launch the vaccination program, which includes inoculations to prevent to measles and polio.

As part of Outreach's existing Community Outreach Program, four health agents regularly perform home visits throughout the neighborhood of Christ Roi, where they monitor health and nutrition and provide public health information to families.

While working with the two-week vaccination campaign in Christ Roi, each community health agent took responsibility for spreading the word throughout a four- to five-mile radius, where they spoke with residents about the free shots available for their children. Once the word was out about the campaign and the day of the clinic arrived, families began lining up outside Outreach's Sr. Ann Weller Clinic, where the vaccinations were administered by our staff.

Mothers traveled for miles with small children

to get to the clinic. Children received vaccinations against measles, mumps, rubella and polio, as well as oral worm medication and vitamin A.

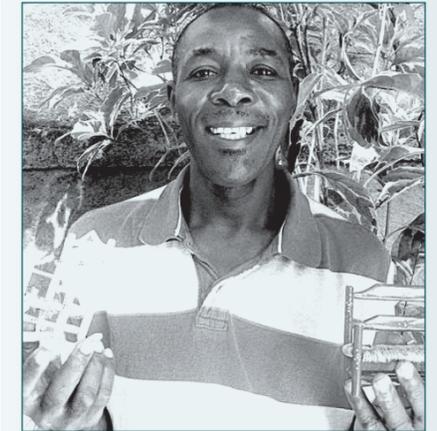
Haiti has the highest rates of infant, under-5-years and maternal mortality in the Western Hemisphere. Some 60 per cent of people lack access to basic health-care services. Haitian children and adults die every day from treatable illnesses such as diarrhea, malaria, tuberculosis, hepatitis, and cholera.

While fewer than 44 percent of the target population in Haiti receives recommended immunizations, the percentage of population vaccinated in the Christ Roi community has far surpassed that amount, thanks in part to the work of Outreach's clinic over the past two decades. Collaborative efforts like those in the April vaccination clinic are central to the ongoing effort to improve the health of children and families.

"This is an enormous step forward for Haiti," said Thomas R. Frieden, director of the CDC&P. "This is a big deal."

During the two-week vaccination campaign, in the month of April alone, approximately 10,000 children were served at Outreach's clinic. Of those 10,000 children, 3,072 received measles, mumps, rubella, vaccine, and 3,137 received polio vaccines. In addition to these vaccinations, 2,299 were given the oral de-worming medication, Albendazole, and 1,625 children were treated with vitamin A.

To learn more about Outreach to Haiti's Medical Program, which includes a primary care clinic with laboratory and pharmacy, community outreach, public health education, and nutrition programs, please visit [www.outreachtohaiti.org/programs/medical](http://www.outreachtohaiti.org/programs/medical)



Jean Roumaire Fleurisme sells his mini-furniture directly to Outreach to Haiti.

## CRAFTS BECOME LIVELIHOODS continued from page 1

ish and new opportunities will open for all her family and friends.

### His Small Furniture Supports a Family

Jean Roumaire Fleurisme began making furniture – albeit in miniature – when he was 15. His father made “people-sized” chairs, and he decided to try his hand at small models.

Today his furniture is one of many handmade crafts sold at Haiti's Back Porch in Middletown.

Now 45, Jean Roumaire still lives in Port-au-Prince, where he grew up. His life was turned upside down with the earthquake, but he and others like him have built back their homes and livelihoods. Today he is working at his craft fulltime.

Jean Roumaire does not have any employees. It takes him about two days to make a set of five pieces – two chairs, one rocker, one settee, and a footstool.

Since he operates without a shop, he travels around to guest houses to sell his work. He is able to support his family of five, although he would welcome more sales.

Contact us to learn more about how Outreach to Haiti promotes skills and livelihoods for Haitians in need.

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