

## **Bernadette Costello rsm, one of the Haven volunteers shares her experience of Build it Week 2011.**

"Before travelling with Haven to Haiti I had been reading, listening to any news reports that I came across and all messages that the various media were sending out from Port au Prince (PauP) were of abhorrent devastation so I feared the worst. I was aware that words and pictures can only tell us so much and I had, as I thought, psyched myself for worst possible human situation. However, to my shock and dismay, nothing can adequately prepare one for absolute devastation and human misery. The situation was far worse than I had expected. The visual impact or lack of any aesthetic feature was appalling, as was the reality of the stench from open sewers etc. which in itself indicated the extent of the devastation.

On Saturday 2nd of April, 340 volunteers set off from Dublin Airport to PauP with Monarch Airlines via Newfoundland and then by road for Gonaives which is Haiti's second largest city in the North West of the country to take part in Haven's third Build it Week. Having arrived in Pau P and survived the long plane trip we were assigned to our respective buses – 7 in all- and the journey to Gonaives was, as I thought, underway. Alas! 15 minutes into our journey the convoy surrounded by security and armed personnel came to a sudden halt. Difficulties with 2 buses resulted in a 3 hour delay. Finally, we were on our way to Gonaives which is a 150 km 4 hour journey on Haitian Motorways!!!! Beyond the human condition, Haiti 's physical infrastructure is dire. Its roads are, for the most part, not paved making transportation difficult.

A little after 12.30 am local time we arrived at the campsite. Greeted by members of Haven staff and advance planning party we were shown to our accommodation – Military tents. In my case it was Tent no 38 which I shared with Ailish, Kathy, Frances, Ann and Mary and for the next 6 nights we slept on canvas camp beds and not even inches in excess!! I have a new appreciation for my own little en-suite bedroom in the Grove and the comfort of a hot shower on demand. We were invited to partake in some beautiful finger food prepared by the chefs. Canteen volunteer team was invited to help so it was down to work immediately distributing trays of welcome food to the tired volunteers. I got to bed at 2.00 am and was up at 4.45 am for light breakfast.

The next morning (Sunday) all the volunteers were up and ready well in advance of our meeting time. The enthusiasm, energy and camaraderie were very palpable as all waited to be served. I quickly found my bearings when Alan – the chief army chef – introduced me to the kitchen fridge where all the necessary supplies for early breakfast were stored. For the rest of the week that was my first task at 4.30 am – to ensure that fruit salad, yoghurt drinks and an array of fruit juices were on the tables for the volunteers. It was military style all the way. You asked few questions but used your initiative... Due to cholera outbreak the medical team was very anxious that nothing was left to chance so for the six days both Anne and I had the task of ensuring that all volunteers washed and sanitised their hands before entering the dining room for each meal. With a wee bit of cajoling and pleading we received the full co-operation of all and got to know them by name. Though difficult standing in the heat we had great craic with the volunteers and were seen as the 'border control' ladies. This ritual was repeated four times daily for the six days.

When catering duties were complete we had the option of joining other teams with the approval of the respective team leaders to help out where necessary. I enjoyed some painting and gardening at different times. Strangers quickly became friends as all had a common purpose. Haven is much more than simply building houses; it's about building communities. Such was the theme of Leslie Buckley's address to the volunteers on Wednesday night when he and George Hook arrived at the site and spent 3 days with us. Individuals had enormous opportunities to express their talent and creativity through various aspects of each project – painting, building playgrounds, landscaping etc.

On Tuesday I spent 3 hours at summer camp interacting through sport, music and arts/crafts with the local children. This was a new initiative by Haven this year and it gave us an opportunity to meet the children and some of the parents and residence of the camp site which was completed by the April 2010 group. I felt from my visit to the camp and talking with some of the natives – using a few French phrases and Creole words (from handbook supplied) that the Haitian people are a proud and energetic race and, if given an opportunity to acquire the necessary skills and training, that they are very capable of changing their present situation and bringing about the necessary developments to be self-sustaining. Unfortunately, money is in short supply and is not always directed toward addressing the fundamental problems which, I believe, remain in education and training, health, sanitation and infrastructural development. The country has potential in terms of tourism with political good will and social justice for all as an aspiration.

Wednesday brought a whole new experience. The extreme temperature of 49 degrees experienced the previous day gave rise to two hours of torrential rain in the early afternoon after which I went on a beneficiary tour into Gonaives . This was a shocking experience. I witnessed 105,000 people living in a large municipal type dump with no water or sanitation whatsoever. The happy and smiling children accompanied us along this trail of profound misery, singing and ensuring that we didn't fall in the 'contaminated muck' The beneficiaries received us into their 15 ft square one-roomed home with dignity and respect and tried to look their best. My heart sank as I departed in tears, mindful of their plight and future prospects for their 5 lovely children. I returned to the camp site in silence and felt physically and emotionally sick as I believe that all human beings are worthy of minimum dignity. I really don't know how they survive. I was forced to retire early that night and my camp mates took advantage of my vulnerability!!!!

Though a culture shock, it was also an incredibly positive and even life changing experience and the native people that I encountered are the real jewel in the crown.

I wonder how/when and if ever this blighted country and its people will experience any degree of normal living. It's the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere and the vast number of its people survive on less than one dollar a day. It would seem that the women are the real workers in this country. Some men spend time fishing but the majority have nothing to work for and as a consequence rape and domestic violence is all too prevalent. Infant mortality is high as is early death in comparison with the rest of the Caribbean. I believe that each and every one of us has been changed by the experience and I certainly feel enriched by those with whom I was privileged to work.

Heading to the airport I thought about the week. I'm so glad that I volunteered for Haven Build it Week and a special thanks to Veronica who made the dream materialize for me. In addition, I would like to thank all of the Haven Team for their commitment to Haiti and the concern shown for the health and safety of the volunteers. I didn't think that it would be as hard as it was but what a week I had!!!! Finally, the conditions at Port au Prince airport and 'checking in' procedures is material for a blockbuster...!"

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