

Frances Kennedy rsm shares her experience of Build it Week 2011

By the time you see this you will have read the accounts of the Haiti trip from my fellow Mercy travellers. Hopefully too, you will have watched the video compiled by Ailish which will give you some idea of our week there.

As is the case with photos, videos, TV etc. the scenes illustrated will give an image of life lived, but nothing can depict the sensation of the intense heat, a landscape devoid of colour or vegetation, the smell of poverty and the sense of hopelessness. Despite the latter, the images may also show the resilience and laughter of a people who have never known what we take for granted.

April 2nd - 10th will be a week etched in my memory. It was 'Build it Week' in Haiti organised by the Haven Partnership, a charity organisation founded by Irish business man Lesley Buckley and his wife Ann who saw the absolute poverty of the Haitian people *before* the earthquake, hurricane and cholera epidemic that was to follow in that country.

350/380 volunteers of all ages and sizes lined up at the Check In desks in Dublin Airport and although we were strangers to one another there was an atmosphere of excitement and anticipation. We were easily recognisable in our steel toe-capped boots, back packs and a variety of long, short and cropped pants! At that stage we didn't know we were facing a twenty-four journey!

I was pleasantly surprised to see the size of the army tents (six camp beds in each) but by the end of the week it was a pretty untidy place! We were unable to wash clothes, had to hang towels etc. to dry on the steel fixtures holding up the tent, and the floor was covered with dust. You should see the state of the place after the rains! I never saw a mirror all week which was a blessing really as only had two 'good' showers in the week. Rest assured I was clean! We were only allowed to shower in the evening after work but by the time I got there it was invariably turned off! Hence the need to wear a hat constantly!

Temperatures rose to 49 degrees, ten degrees hotter in the tents, so the water carriers were a godsend as were the good meals! Yet, the workers continued to build, to paint, to cook, to 'garden' to clean plates and trays, to administer medical aid and generally keep one another going with banter and good humour. There was also great poetic and musical talent etc. when we let off steam at the end of the day.

I was very impressed with the organisation of the Haven staff, as aside from the obvious building of the two roomed houses and other buildings for the Haitian people, their priority was the health and safety of the volunteers.

Aside from the Haitians who worked on site we did not have much contact with the general public as strict security measures applied at all times. We didn't have Creole to communicate but facial expressions, signs and body language go a long way to express feelings.

The other Sisters have written of their visit to the homes of the families who were to move into the new houses. We were advised not to wear any watches/jewellery. We had to leave cameras and even bottled water on the bus as it could result in unwelcome demands. Haven security personnel accompanied each group during the visits.

How the people still maintained their dignity in the squalor and degrading living conditions is beyond comprehension. Despite the welcome we received from the families and the multitude of adults

and children we met along the way, I confess I felt extremely uncomfortable witnessing the extreme poverty with our sunglasses, boots and good clothes (dirty and sweaty as they were).

The houses were officially handed over to a representative of the beneficiary families by Leslie Buckley so all took pride in that a job was well done. It was great to be part of a team whose whole focus was to provide accommodation for families and who worked ungodly hours in sweltering heat to accomplish what we set out to do. I think Catherine McAuley would have volunteered with us!

It may be a drop in the ocean, but every drop matters.

Thank you to all for your financial donation and especially for your prayers and good wishes.

Frances Kennedy rsm
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