

Mary Walshe shares her experience of Build it Week April 2011

“One generation plants the tree; another enjoys the shade” This Chinese proverb in some way sums up in a few words my experience of what our Build It Week April 2011 has been for me. While I am still feeling some bus and jet lag from our two long almost 24 hours each way journeys in a short space of time, I have a great sense that all the volunteers (370 in all, I think) who together completed 80 two roomed stable but simple homes, planted shrubs and trees creating gardens, a playground and finished a multi-purpose community centre for 80 of the very poorest families in the western hemisphere, so that they enjoy the shade of their new homes and a more shaded and colourful environment.

Painted on the side of one of the houses was a slogan “we built this together” and indeed that week was a tremendous experience of just that whether one was block laying, roofing, painting, bringing water and rehydration salts to the workers, labouring or in the kitchen or catering areas – all was done with the intention of bringing life, hope and a better future for people who are living in extreme poverty. And despite the intense heat of 45 degrees + each day and beginning the day as early as 4.15 am, all were in good cheer at all times.

Most central to our week there were two visits – the first to the Haitian families who have already been privileged to own one of the homes already built by previous volunteers in a Build It Week and specifically to the multi-purpose community centre where the children and many of their mothers enjoyed the various activities organized by some of our volunteers. The second visit was to the area where the families previously lived and who would be lucky to be the proud owners of the houses we came to complete in our Build It Week. The latter visit was a heart rending experience to witness the devastating conditions they have lived in – many children going around shoeless and completely naked in an environment that included pigs, goats donkeys and dogs wandering around freely in such squalor – with open sewer and a dump where the hungry dogs searched for a bite to eat. The stagnant water was the remains of both Hurricane Hanna and Hurricane Frances in 2007 and 2008 which covered and destroyed the homes and a mine, and now is a very serious source of malaria. Many of us were in tears in the midst of such misery and the few homes we visited there were one roomed shacks not even fit for any animal.

I found not being able to speak their language, French but mainly Creole, a great barrier, having lived in Peru where I spoke Spanish fluently. However the warmth we felt both for them and them for us could be communicated without words and that didn’t need a language.

Passion Week is upon us and I know that my experience on the Build it Week, as I reflect back on what is a daily Passion for the majority of the Haitian people, will stay with me as we remember the Passion and Death of Jesus. I trust that those who gave their time, talents, resources and energy to these people will also remember. We hope that the people of Gonaives will experience a little of the resurrection as they move into their new homes and a more healthy environment.

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