

A Humanitarian Outreach Immersion Experience

On Monday April 17, 2017 a group of five psychology major students and two staff/faculty members from St. Augustine College visited Haiti for one week for a humanitarian outreach immersion service experience. The purpose of the trip was for participants to experience a different culture from their own by immersing into the Haitian culture. Participants stayed at the Child Jesus School in Petit Goâve located southwest of Port au Prince, Haiti. The goal of this program was strictly of outreach humanitarian service in that participants brought donations collected throughout the semester from students and staff at the college. Donations consisted of clothing, shoes, school materials, and general toiletries.

In addition to bringing donations, participants prepared a busy agenda that allowed numerous opportunities for sharing and interacting with the Haitian people. For example, the next day after arrival, participants worked with the children at the school. Each participant chose a classroom to work with. At the Child Jesus School, classrooms are divided by learning levels and not necessarily by grade levels, as many children may not have the opportunity to begin elementary school learning at age five or six as in the United States. Teaching English was essential at all levels in this trip, though teaching techniques varied for all classroom levels. For the lower levels, students learned English by repeating the alphabet, numbers, and by learning three-to-four-letter words. At the more advanced levels, students practiced English by playing *jingo* and through questions and answers with their assigned instructors. From a psychological point of view, in one classroom, students had the opportunity to do projective drawings, illustrating through their drawings about themselves, their lives, and their families.

At the Child Jesus Centre all children get a small snack at midmorning as well as a meal of rice and beans, and sometimes pasta before going home in the afternoon. Assisting staff with serving lunch to the children was another form of interaction between group participants and the children. Washing dishes was in addition another way of interacting with the kitchen staff. After the children went home, group participants ate their lunch. The sharing of meals became a meaningful time for the participants as it gave the group a chance to discern about their work and interactions with the children and staff while enjoying the Haitian cuisine. Singing in French Creole before meals was also significant as it gave the group an opportunity to learn and practice a new language.

Other activities that took place in the evenings were playing *jingo* and *lotería* with staff members. Playing *lotería* gave staff the opportunity to learn Spanish whereas with *jingo* staff practiced their English skills. The prizes won consisted of small items such as toothbrushes, toothpaste, soap, and deodorant. But the goal was for all to interact with each other and have

fun. Visiting the homeless shelter was another humanitarian activity. Each individual at the shelter received a small bag of toiletries and candy in addition to a plate of hot food. Some members in this shelter suffer from mental illness and the majority is older. Additionally, a smaller group of the participants visited a hospital in the town of Grand Goâve. The group met with Cuban doctors, surgeons, and nurses (*la brigada cubana*) who are serving at this hospital for a period of two years. They talked to the group about the needs and difficulties experienced by the Haitian people after the numerous natural disasters in Haiti. In much the same way, Father Magloire, a diocesan priest who manages the Child Jesus Centre and clinical psychologist, spoke to the group of psychology major students in reference to how mental illness and mental disorders are perceived by the Haitian people.

On the fourth day in Haiti, the group had the opportunity to visit the School of Nursing and one of the labs at the University of Port au Prince. In addition, the remains of the old Cathedral were visited and the museum. Participants shopped and experienced more of the urban life in Port au Prince, capital of Haiti. The group returned to Petit Goâve late that evening and rapidly prepared for Friday's events at the school. All donations brought to Haiti were separated by size and gender. One of the participant's individual projects was to teach the older children and the teachers how to make *piñatas*. A total of seven piñatas were made, one for each classroom, these were decorated with colorful tissue paper and filled with candy and hand-made confetti.

The last day working with the children was by far the most joyful for both the children and the group participants, it was also a time to say goodbye. As usual, after honors to the flag students went to their classrooms and the group participants had a chance to review what was taught and learned during their time in Haiti. After recess, the children had prepared a farewell program for the group which included singing and dancing. One could see the effort and enthusiasm the children placed in providing the best program as a way of thanking the group for their contribution. They also provided participants with small canvas paintings typical of the region. Last but not least, it was time to break the *piñatas*. The children were instructed on what a *piñata* was and the purpose for breaking a *piñata*. Children needed to be blind folded in order to hit the piñata with a broomstick. Children soon got the hang of it and happily took turns hitting the *piñatas*. The culmination of each *piñata* breaking was collecting the candy that had fallen in the ground. Children enjoyed this, as it was the first time they were exposed to such fun. The children got to enjoy a new way of having fun from a different cultural perspective. At this time, all donations were distributed to the children and staff, and everyone left with something, but most importantly the children left with plenty of joy and fun.

On Saturday the group enjoyed a well deserved trip to the beach. Participants enjoyed the cool waters of the sea and unusually 'black sand.' A group of young dancers came to the beach to

practice a dance routine and SAC participants were invited to join in their dancing, this gave the group an opportunity to dance to Haitian music and rhythms. That evening a group of members of the Secular Order of Servites of Mary (OSSM) came to pray the rosary. Those participants of the Catholic faith joined for prayers which were done in French Creole, English, and Spanish. Praying was followed by a small fellowship of home-made *gorditas* and gift giving.

Sunday the children returned in the morning for their weekly outdoor mass celebration. This was definitely a mass for the children and by the children as they were the ones doing the readings and singing. One of the teachers is also their choir instructor and once again one could see that the Haitian children at the Child Jesus Centre were born to sing. There was a time during the mass where all hymns were sung in all three languages, English, French Creole, and Spanish. Once again this was a time of faith sharing despite cultural and language differences. It became a time of unity. Later that afternoon, it was the group's time to give back and serve those who have served while at the Child Jesus School. The group of participants cooked lunch for the day. The sharing of diverse foods was meaningful as the participants cooked tortillas, lasagna, chicken and potatoes, bean tostadas, and gorditas. For dessert a raisin cake was served which was decorated by the cook as learnt from one the participants.

In sum, leaving Haiti was sad, but it was time to return home and continue with each other's reality in Chicago. It rained through the entire ride back to Port au Prince from Petit Goâve. The group started to experience a cultural shock primarily because many of the songs that were being played on the radio were the same songs sung in Spanish at one time. Some of the members sang in Spanish along with those being sung in French Creole. The rain never stopped. Schools were closed for the day as there was a threat of a hurricane and the Haitian people continue to fear natural disasters as they have so often experienced natural hardship. Along with singing there was also a period of silence as the group members were trying to process each of their experiences while in Haiti. Some of the group participants built closer relationships with staff members as these volunteered to participate in interviews as part of their culture and psychology course project. Good bye and hugs were shared at the airport. The group was thanked for the much happiness brought to those with whom the group had interacted with, particularly the children. The group of participants was invited to return to Haiti. At the end, participants departed to their assigned gates of departure with the memories of such unique experience packed in their backpacks and forever in their hearts!