

## **Another World**

**By**

**William A. Palmer, Jr.**

Nothing you have read or seen on television can prepare you for the experience of stepping off an airplane in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Anyone who has grown up in a setting where the majority of one's neighbors live in adequate housing and most drivers have some sense of the rules of the road will immediately be overwhelmed by the scene that unfolds just beyond the airport gate. A year after the devastating earthquake that killed nearly a quarter million people, thousands of Haitians still are living in tents or makeshift shelters. Piles of debris obstruct the streets, causing drivers to play chicken with oncoming traffic as they detour around them. The country's government is in chaos. The stink of death continues to hang over an old quarry north of the capital where convoys of dump trucks deposited the bodies of quake victims commingled with the rubble that crushed them. But a longer look reveals glimpses of hope amid the ruin and squalor that is Haiti today.

The sun always rises red in Port-au-Prince, obscured by the constant haze of cooking and trash fires and the ever-present dust of unpaved roads and streets. Its growing light reveals the deforested hills around the city, which are dotted with tents where houseless or simply frightened residents have been living for a year. Some of the tent cities built by foreign governments or the UN are laid out with military precision; most, however, are scattered helter-skelter, wherever a patch of land is available.

Even before dawn, Haitians line up along the roadsides, waiting to catch a ride into town on a tap-tap, a capped pickup truck with wooden benches on either side of the bed. For a few cents' fare, riders cram themselves into the exotically painted vehicles that would fail safety inspections anywhere else and travel to their jobs or to school.

Public schools technically exist in Haiti, but teachers often go without paychecks because of the instability of the government. The preferred alternative to public education is private or church-related schools. One of the wonders of early morning in Port-au-Prince is the sight of little children in their school uniforms, holding the hands of their mothers while stepping over piles of rubble on their way to school. How their starched white shirts and blouses appear so spotless, given their living conditions, is a miracle in itself.

Along the Route de Tabarre, not far from the Toussaint L'Ouverture International Airport, is a church-related school where I found myself working during the last week of January. Almost unimaginable to an American, and certainly to one who works for Head Start, the school has no running water. A single port-a-potty is available for students and staff, and hands are washed after toileting with a plastic jug and basin of water. Crude Masonite blackboards are attached to the concrete walls of the classrooms, and the school's single computer is in the office of the superintendent, who also is the wife of the church's pastor. But in every class, students were attentive and focused. When time came for recess, I spoke with several of the teachers. They informed me that all were trilingual, speaking Haitian Creole (a form of French), Spanish, and

English. They were proud of their school and what was being accomplished there every day, despite the primitive conditions.

With their neat uniforms and bright smiles, the uninhibited joy they displayed as they danced and kicked a small ball around in the courtyard, and their work ethic in the classroom, these Haitian schoolchildren conveyed to me a powerful message of hope. In a ruined and traumatized city, these incredibly resilient kids and their uncomplaining teachers reminded me of the power that cannot be assessed in terms of wealth and possessions. And with a little help from compassionate people around the globe, I believe they hold the key to transform the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere into another world.

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