



CHALLENGE

The Woman On The Mountain

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People often ask me why I go to Haiti. I've never been able to adequately answer this question and am not sure that I ever will. The experiences I've had in Haiti have shaped my life in ways that I cannot explain. One of these experiences involves old friends, new friends and one special woman I met for the first time on Sunday, January 19, 2014. Seven of us left after church to hike to Fort de Bayonnais, which is the fort you see off in the distance on the mountain top behind the church in Bayonnais. For this hike, we had four Americans and three Haitian friends for the journey, including two brothers; Olguens and Fegens Saint-Louis who have both become family to several of us over the years.

The hike involves some amount of climbing with both hands and feet with long stretches of continuous and significant vertical gain. For this reason we typically depart an hour before sunrise to make sure we make it to the top as the sun is coming up over the mountain. In retrospect, leaving mid-day for the fort was an ill advised decision which quickly



became evident as the afternoon heat and sun bore down upon us from the start. We struggled up the mountain in the heat, stopping frequently to drink water and catch our breath. Along the way we met many children who came out from their homes to greet us, as well as a funeral procession of about 100 people who were walking together and singing while carrying a coffin up the side of the mountain. After another hour of hiking we came to a house where the funeral procession had ended and visitation had begun. We did not want to impose ourselves on their group so we continued on up the mountain.

After about three hours, as we were finally approaching the fort, we heard off in the distance a lone female voice signing a song. We stopped to try to determine where it was coming from. After a couple minutes, an elderly woman appeared out from the tall grass wearing a blue skirt, blue blouse and red head band which partially covered her grey hair. She was barefoot, carrying a machete and a brown cloth satchel.

When she saw us, she immediately came up to us, hugged us all and began signing as loud as she could, which was quite loud. Olguens asked the woman what she was doing up here and found out that she had gone down to church and was walking back home over the mountain.



After we were done talking and were about to part ways, she asked if she could pray for us. She began to pray while Olguens translated. She prayed to thank God for sending us there and allowing us to meet each other, she prayed for our safe journey home and she prayed for our return. I have never heard anyone pray like this woman prayed. She was loud to the point of yelling and shaking.

Here was an elderly woman who was barefoot, had hiked twice the distance we had and all she wanted to do was give thanks for having had the opportunity to meet us. It was something that deeply affected each of us who witnessed it and was an experience that was transformative and humbling for me personally.

We thanked her for singing, for being with us and for praying for us and then we each went our separate ways.



Not much was said from that point on during the hike as we all tried to absorb what had just happened to us.

After our return to the states, we each tried to convey to friends and family what had happened to us on the mountain in Haiti that day. Friends and co-workers of Brett Jarrett, one of the hikers in the group, were so affected by Brett's telling of the experience that they commissioned a local artist to create a painting which captured the event and surprised him

with it during his retirement party from Lowe's Home Improvement after 24 years.

This leads us to this year's hike to the fort. We left before sunrise on Saturday, January 10, 2015 with the same group as last year plus two new Americans. Our goals for this year's hike was to distribute shoes, shirts and bibles to the kids who had come out to see us last year and to hopefully find the Woman On The Mountain again. The shoe distributions went well and we quickly went through the hundred pairs that we were able to carry in our backpacks.

As we talked to the children we would show a photo of the woman to see if anyone knew where she lived. We eventually found a girl who knew the woman and where she lived. She said that she would take us to her. So after finishing the shoes and saying goodbye to our new friends, we headed up the mountain to find the woman's house. As we hiked, we picked up more and more children in the group, so by the time we arrived, unannounced, at the house we had grown to about fifty people. We knocked on the door which was answered by an elderly man, who turned out to be the woman's husband. He closed the door, went back inside to put on a grey hat and white coat and then came back out to greet us.



Olguens was translating for us again this hike and he began to tell the man who we were and why we were there. The man stopped Olguens in mid-sentence and told him that his wife was not there but he knew who we were because she had told him about us in bed the night before just before they went to sleep and she said that we would be coming soon.

She could not have known we were on the hike, that we were in Bayonnais or even in Haiti. It was a chilling moment.

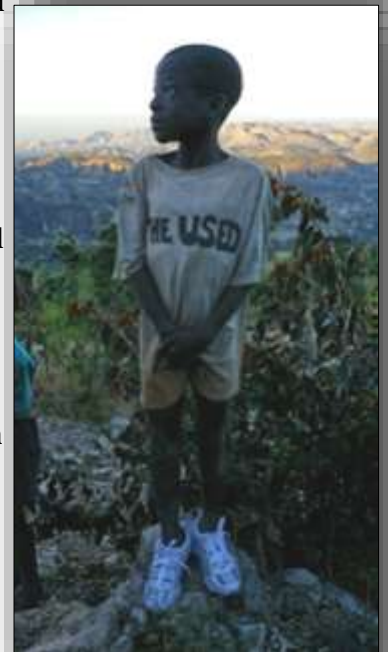
The disappointment of knowing that we were not going to get to see the Woman On The Mountain again this year was counterbalanced by the knowledge that she had remembered us and had been thinking about us like we had been thinking about her. We thanked her husband for having us, asked him to please tell his wife that we said hello and left to continue up the mountain headed for the fort.

There are actually two forts on the mountain, the one that we hiked to last year which is visible from Bayonnais and another one further up the mountain which is not visible until you are at the first fort. The first fort is Fort de Bayonnais which faces west overlooking the Bay of Gonaives and the Caribbean Sea. The second higher fort faces northeast overlooking the Bay of Acul and the Atlantic Ocean.

We hiked up to the first fort along with about thirty of the children from the woman's house and then after staying for a while started further up the mountain to the other fort. The remainder of the children who joined us along the way dropped off between the first and second fort so by the time we arrived we were back to our original group. We looked around the second fort for about thirty minutes as there is more to look at in this fort; rooms, cannons, etc.



We packed back and started heading back down the mountain to OFCB. As we were climbing out over a series of jagged boulders that you have to traverse in order to get back to the trail headed down, I saw a white shirt appear from behind one of the rocks. It was the Woman On The Mountain! There was much joy and a lot of tears by everyone.



She had not been home, so she didn't know that we had tried to find her there and was on her way from the other side of the mountain headed to church for a meeting. She sang and prayed for us again like she had the year prior and then proceeded to lead us back down the mountain so we could spend more time together.

She led us for about an hour before stopping to say goodbye and head back up the mountain for her meeting. We thanked her for being with us, for leading us and for remembering us. We told her about Brett's painting of her and said that we would bring her a copy of it next time we came to see her and her husband.

It was a difficult goodbye as we don't know when we will see her again but we all know that the memories of her will burn brightly in our minds until we do.

I think about the Woman On The Mountain almost every day. She made me a better person. She made me a better father. She made me a better husband. She made me more able to see what is important in the world and what is not. She inspired me to help her people, our people, the people of Haiti.

If I hadn't met her, I wouldn't know her.

This is why I go to Haiti.



UPCOMING MISSION TRIPS

March 4-11:

Available Slot

March 19-23:

First Presbyterian Charlotte

April 8-15:

Available Slot

April 22-29:

Sardis Presbyterian

May 6-13:

Available Slot

If you would like to travel to Bayonnais, Haiti on a mission trip, contact David Nichols, World of God Board Member at david5cents@aol.com

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