

The Haiti French Literacy Project

An International Collaboration of The Rotary Clubs of Erie, Les Cayes (Haiti) and District 7280 of Northwestern PA

BACKGROUND

Haiti is the poorest Caribbean state with an estimated population of 7,148,000 and per capita income of \$300. Between 85% and 95% of the population are monolingual in Creole. The remaining 10% of bilinguals in French and Creole constitute an elite oligarchy of power.

The town of LesCayes is 120 miles from the capital, isolated by a 7 ½ hour drive on unsafe dirt roads. Electricity is sporadic in Les Cayes and many homes do not have water or access to wells. Most workers are in banana and sugar industries; others fish. Les Cayes has suffered from hurricanes in recent years.

Literacy level in Haiti is 23%-33% with approximately 65% having no formal education. The poverty levels keep many children out of school. Although Creole has traditionally been the only language spoken in homes, French was designated the official language of Haiti in 1918.

In 1979, a program of educational reform and equalization was started where Creole is used as the medium of instruction in the first four years of school and French is taught as a foreign language. However, French continues to be the language of advantage as students must pass a mandatory state French exam to advance beyond sixth grade, and high school classes are taught exclusively in French. Poor children drop out in sixth grade without the advantage of practicing French at home where only Creole is spoken.

ROTARY COLLABORATION

In January 2002, three Rotarians (**Richard DeLuca and Drew Harvey of the Erie Club and Terry McConnell of the Presque Isle Club**) traveled to Haiti on a Carl Miller Discovery Grant secured by **Erie Club Rotarian Donna Stone**. The purpose of the trip was to explore an international project with the Rotary Club of Les Cayes, Haiti. The outcome of the trip led to an international collaboration of Rotarians to create systemic change in the lives of poor children through improved literacy.

For the past seven years, the Haiti French Literacy Project in Les Cayes has hired 45 teachers-in-training annually to tutor 170 children for one hour of French every day after school. The cohort of children began in third grade and covered three elementary schools in Les Cayes. After four full years of tutoring with the assistance of cassette tapes, individual writing boards and refurbished computers, all but a handful of students from the original cohort have advanced to secondary school.

The literacy program facilitator has written a “how-to” book which contains lessons plans for the tutors who are studying to become teachers. These two factors – better educated teachers and use of this book could potentially change teaching techniques in the Haitian educational system over time.

The oral and written progress of each student is monitored via testing, grades and annual public performances in French. Reports on student progress are sent to the Erie Rotary Club twice a year by members of the Les Cayes Club who support and monitor the progress of the project.

In January of 2005, Erie Club Rotarian and then principal of Villa Maria High School, **Cynthia Martone**, traveled to Haiti to assess the progress of the program and work with Les Cayes Rotarians. She reported that the project is using funds effectively and following the best educational practices possible considering the dire poverty in Les Cayes. It was Cynthia who took the professional photographs in this exhibit.

The Haiti Literacy Program continued in 2006/2007 with a new cohort of 200 students. A story about the project was featured in the international publication: *The Rotarian*, February 2006.

Contributions to sustain the project are approximately \$7,500 per year to subsidize the tuition for the 45 tutors studying to become teachers. Other funding helps to print the training manuals. The Les Cayes Club has made donations of computers and supplies. There are many additional needs including subsidy for math tutors and library books in French.

ABOUT THE PHOTOGRAPHS

These richly evocative photographs of school children from Les Cayes, Haiti is the result of an international collaboration of Rotarians that has given them the gift of a promising future through a unique literacy project. These photographs give an intimate reflection on exquisite, wide-eyed young people going to school, in the classroom, studying alone and in groups despite extremely poor conditions, knowing that becoming literate is the way to escape their dire circumstances.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

A former Erie Club Rotarian, **Cynthia Martone** is an award-winning photographer and educator working and living in the State of Qatar, an emirate on the Persian Gulf. The Erie Rotary Club sent her to evaluate and document the progress of the French Literacy Project in Les Cayes in January 2006 during which time she took the photographs in this exhibit.

YOU CAN HELP!

You, too, can change the lives of poor Haitian children by supporting the Haiti French Literacy Project through purchase of a photo or a direct donation. For more information, contact Erie Club Rotarian Mary Ellen Dahlkemper at 814-878-2167 or mdahlkemper@stairwaysbh.org.

Total Funding from 2002 through May 2009:

RI Carl Miller Discovery Grant	\$ 3,000
RI District 7280 (PA, USA)	\$31,610
Rotary Club of Erie, PA	\$13,500
Rotary Club of Port Allegany, PA	\$ 4,550
Rotary Club of Presque Isle	\$ 500
Rotary Club of Grove City, PA	\$ 400
Interact Club of Villa Maria, Erie, PA	\$ 721
French Club St. Mary's HS (Texas)	\$ 200
Fundraiser (2003)	\$ 4,709
Proceeds Photo Exhibit	\$ 738