

My Excellent Adventure in Haiti

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Dawn Bacchus-Horan, Evelyn Drake, Richard Panzer, Karrin Brady, and Rose Gbadamassi

When I was invited to share *Relationship Intelligence* education in Haiti, I really didn't know much about the many years of service by Women's Federation for World Peace (WFWP) led by Evelyn Drake, WFWP Tampa chapter leader in that mountainous, beautiful yet impoverished country. Arriving in Port au Prince airport on June 21, I was soon joined by Evelyn Drake, Karrin Brady from WFWP in Maryland, Dr. Dawn Bacchus-Jordan, and Rose Gbadamassi from Minnesota.

Soon we were barreling down a 2 lane road on a mountainous, five hour ride to Cap Haitian, a town of 60,000 in the northern part of the country. The bus driver honked his horn several times a minute to warn pedestrians, motorcyclists, cars and trucks that he wouldn't be slowing down, veering into the opposite lane to bypass slower moving vehicles. The scenery was a bittersweet view of green hills and shacks with corrugated metal roofs lining the road and higher up on the sides of the hills. As we approached the house where we would stay, cows, goats and chickens by the side of the road nonchalantly welcomed us to their world.

This country of 10 million people has suffered a lot in its history, most recently from a devastating earthquake in 2010, which led to the spread of diseases like cholera, typhoid fever, and hepatitis. Malaria is also prevalent as well as HIV/AIDS. I reminded myself that in order to have a productive visit I needed to shed my American/developed-world expectations about running hot water and consistent electricity. Instead of focusing on what people didn't have, I told myself to relax and just appreciate people for who they are. I hoped that some of the French I learned in high school would come to mind, and some people did speak English. It helped that the house where we stayed had a beautiful view of the nearby hills and a tree full of ripe mangoes that we were happy to consume!

Relationship Intelligence education has been positively received by hundreds of thousands of youth in schools all over the U.S., but the level of appreciation for the content in Haiti was so much greater than I've experienced in my home country, like offering a cup of water to someone in a desert.

On the first day, a Sunday afternoon, educators from all over the area gathered at a local school to hear about the theoretical basis of *Relationship Intelligence* education. I felt badly that we had to delay the presentation until the LCD projector arrived, but it finally did and nearly 100 educators came on their own initiative, a testimony to the foundation of trust that WFWP has created in this part of the country.

I was keenly aware that while the U.S. and the United Nations have done a lot of good by contributing hundreds of millions of dollars in relief funds after the earthquake and to purchase antiretroviral therapy (ART) medicines that have saved millions of lives of people infected with HIV/AIDS in countries like Haiti, both of these also often promote education that normalizes high-risk behaviors through the idea that youth have "sexual rights" to engage in sexual intimacy anytime they wish as long as it is done "safely," in contrast to the values of most parents.

With the help of Mrs. Drake, who translated my words into French and Creole, I was able to share about

the need to engage the internal ideals and values of youth, giving as an example the encouraging research in the U.S. that the vast majority (92%) of youth and young adults in the U.S. express a desire to get married and to become parents someday. Effective sexual health education should engage such idealistic aspirations of youth instead of ignoring them. In Uganda, a country with an even more serious AIDS problem than Haiti, an alliance of government, civic and religious leaders was able to reduce HIV infections from 15% of the population to 5% by emphasizing abstinence for youth and monogamy for adults.



A serious discussion of the harmful effects of irresponsible messages in popular music and entertainment followed my presentation. Since research shows that parents have the greatest influence on youth, as well as other trusted adults such as teachers, we should not be intimidated by the power of mass media. Groups like WFWP as well as churches and schools can empower parents and educators to guide youth to have successful, healthy lives, marriages and families. Several of those attending urgently asked that more such trainings be offered and that the materials be translated into French and Creole.



The next program, for several hundred youth and parents, took place the following morning at a church in downtown Cap Haitian. With the combination of high temperature, humidity and little ventilation, within 5 minutes my shirt was almost completely wet! I was hoping to show powerpoint slides from two of our most popular presentations for youth in the U.S., but cable problems forced me to speak without any electronic visual aids.

With the sweltering heat, I worried, “how long will I be able to keep their attention?” I prayed seriously to be able to touch their original minds and made sure to be as interactive as possible. Amazingly they all stayed engaged for the nearly two hours of discussions. Several teenagers asked very thoughtful questions

about how to deal with peer pressure and media influence as well as about reproduction and birth control.

In the afternoon we walked to the outskirts of Cap Haitian to a school on top of a hill run by an association of pastors in northern Haiti. It was challenging, especially for the women wearing high heels. All of us were glad when the pastor flagged down a car to carry us the rest of the way. About 80 pastors and youth educators, some of whom had traveled for hours, gathered to see the *Relationship Intelligence* presentation on “Protecting Your Future,” which encourages youth to avoid risky behaviors like drugs, alcohol, and uncommitted sex in order to focus on achieving their own future life goals. Again, many of the pastors and youth leaders asked for the presentations to be made available in French and Creole. In response, I told them I would work with WFWP to translate the presentations into French, and possibly Creole. We wanted to make this curriculum available, at no cost, as soon as possible.

True Parents taught us to go to the most difficult places to share God’s love and to find solutions for people’s problems with the heart of a parent. That is what Women’s Federation is doing in Haiti. I felt it was a great honor for me to be part of that effort. I could see that the combination of principled education taught by WFWP with a science-and-reality-based curriculum like *Relationship Intelligence* is a powerful one. I feel great hope for the future of this country.



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