

# Standing One With the People of Haiti

In response to a great need in Haiti following the magnitude 7.0 Earthquake in January 2010, the Canadian Federation and U.S. Federation of Sisters of Saint Joseph adopted the proposal, *Rebuilding Haiti through the Empowerment of Girls*. This project is a 10-year commitment to raise \$356,200 for Mission Haiti, Inc. It will ensure 13 years of education for 10 girls in Léogâne, Haiti, assist with salaries for and certification of teachers and provide for partial financial assistance for building the Coeur de Marie College secondary school, to replace the one destroyed in the earthquake.

In February 2016, a seven-person delegation from the U.S. Federation of Sisters of Saint Joseph traveled to Haiti — the poorest country in the Americas, to meet the sponsored girls and to learn how the commitment to Mission Haiti, Inc., is making a positive difference in the lives of Haitians. **Sisters Celeste Mokrzycki SSJ and Sharon White SSJ** represented the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Philadelphia as part of the delegation. The delegation also included: Sisters Mary Ellen Gondeck, CSJ (Detroit, Michigan) and Lynn Miller, CSJ (Baden, PA); Associates Nina Hershey (Watertown, NY), Evelyn Mazzola (Detroit, MI) and Mary Palamar (Watertown, NY). Mission Haiti Inc., Board Members, Jimmy Dunn, Connie and Jack Pillner and Shelley Butler completed the group.

To be a Sister of Saint Joseph is to be about relationships. The week-long immersion trip to Haiti was an opportunity for the U.S. delegation to develop relationships with each other, the leaders of Mission Haiti, Inc., Sisters of the Companions of Jesus and hundreds of Haitians. As Sisters of Saint Joseph, Sisters Celeste and Sharon have dedicated their lives to helping the poor, marginalized and vulnerable. What challenged them most perhaps, was encountering the malnourished children at Missionaries of Charity Health/Wellness Center and the Restavek children — slaves who are commonplace throughout this nation.

The jam-packed itinerary of visits to places funded by Mission Haiti, Inc., took them to numerous schools run by the Sisters of the Companions of Jesus. At Annunciation primary school, they met with the 10 sponsored girls. Gifts were exchanged between the students and their visitors. In anticipation of the visit, students had practiced songs and dances—gifts for the visitors. The delegation gifted the students with t-shirts, hats, bracelets and toys donated by the Philadelphia area community (see page 8). In each classroom, students greeted the American visitors with the gifts of dance, song and drawings.



*Pictured from top to bottom: a Coeur de Marie College student blows a kiss; Annunciation School students wearing new Phillies gear; Annunciation School students enjoy a break from the classroom; Village of Jesus resident plays bingo*

All photos in this article are courtesy of Celeste Mokrzycki SSJ and Sharon White SSJ.

“Haitians speak mostly Creole,” said Sister Sharon. “While the verbal communication was a challenge, the language of the eyes and engagement of faces drew us into deep relationship with the Sisters, school children and the elderly displaced men and women at the Village of Jesus.”

There is a reason the project with Haiti was entitled *Rebuilding Haiti Through the Empowerment of Girls* — a strongly-held belief of the Sisters of Saint Joseph is: “On the education of women, largely depends the future of society.” Sister Sharon stated, “UNICEF notes that in circumstances of great poverty, girls are predominately at risk. They are vulnerable to abuse in all its forms and very often these girls are limited to households in which they are virtually slaves. Thus, the availability of education for girls is a key aspect of bringing about sig-

nificant social transformation. Education for girls yields countless opportunities and life choices, more workforce participation and greater involvement of women in political and socio-economic decision-making.”

Of the schools, Sister Sharon says, “We saw much progress, as well as need. The teaching staff is very stable. One teacher has achieved advanced certifications; the others are still in process. In a country where the adult literacy rate is 52.9 percent, being a teacher is no small accomplishment.” At the new site of Coeur de Marie College secondary school, more progress is underway. “We helped to purchase the land for the new school. Since the earthquake, students have been in temporary classrooms. New construction is comprised of poured concrete instead of the less durable cement blocks. Funding for the school itself

comes from another partner in mission with Mission Haiti, Inc., an organization called, ‘Caritas Germany.’ ”

“Each day began with community prayer and faith sharing,” said Sister Sharon. “Every evening we reflected on the day, sharing the state of our hearts by naming a rose, something positive and uplifting — a thorn, something that was challenging or difficult to absorb and a bud — a hope or desire for Haiti’s future.” This contemplative practice helped the group to process the Haiti experience. Sister Celeste recalled, “As each day went by, I noticed there were fewer thorns and more buds. Once we got past the rocky streets, past cultural pieces and the challenges of the physical nature of the place, we began to meet the people. We spent more one-on-one time with individuals and found them hope-filled. We began to focus on the hope.”



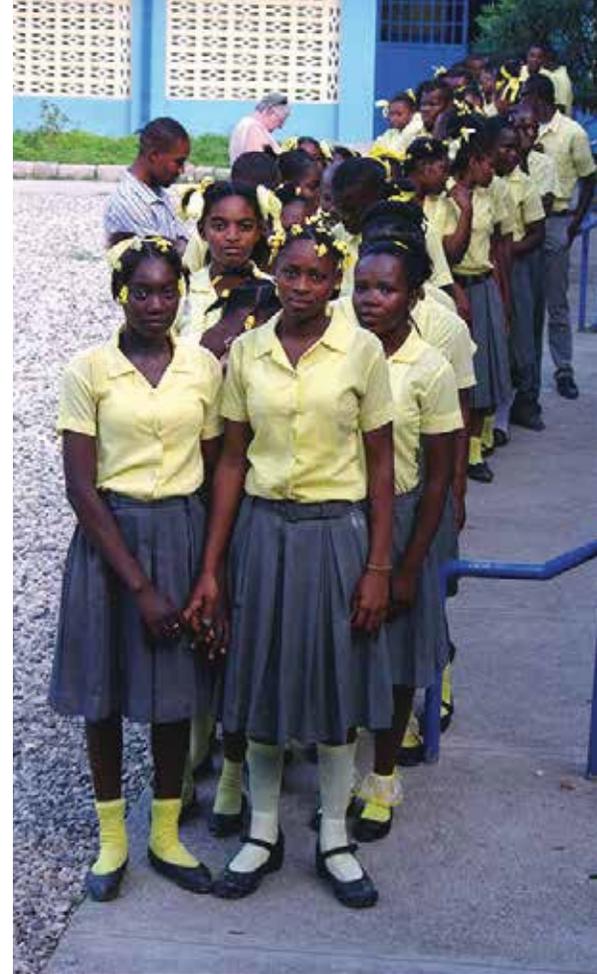
Sharon White SSJ plays ball with Sister Josepha, foundress of the Sisters of the Companions of Jesus Congregation.

At the Missionaries of Charity Health/Wellness Center, Sisters Celeste and Sharon held, fed and played with severely malnourished babies. “Knowing that an infant suffering from malnutrition would feel my loving embrace was a rose,” said Sister Sharon. “However, the thorn was wondering if the food I gave the infant was going to be her last meal. As an educated woman, the bud is the knowledge that I have the ability to look for broader avenues to create systemic changes after I left Haiti. These times of deep reflection and contemplation provided the grace and a compelling desire to take this experience back to the U.S. and beg others to get involved.”

“What touched my heart most deeply, was meeting the Restavek children at St. Rose

de Lima School,” said Sister Celeste. “They are children whose families are so desperately poor that their parents give or sell them to strangers (usually at a geographic distance) because the host families promise to provide the children with a better life. Instead, the children enter a life of indentured servitude — a *modern day slavery*.” A recently passed, but not yet enforced Haitian law against human trafficking, identifies the plight of the Restaveks. UNICEF estimates 300,000 children live as Restaveks. This form of human trafficking seems to have become an acceptable part of the Haitian culture.

“I encountered a mother of five children whose face reflected the painful struggle of this heart-wrenching decision. She cradled a baby in her arms and



*Pictured top: Rose de Lima School — Restaveks attend school in the afternoon for a few hours — the lucky ones who get educated.*

*Pictured bottom left and right: Mother of five struggling with decision about sending her child to live with a family as a Restavek meets with Sister Alta Emile of the Sisters of the Companions of Jesus.*





*Pictured top: Ten girls whose education is sponsored by the Rebuilding Haiti Through the Empowerment of Girls project.*

*Pictured bottom left: Celeste Mokrzycki SSJ shows photos to students.*

*Pictured bottom right: Delegation poses with painting gifted by the Sisters of the Companions of Jesus. Kneeling, Celeste Mokrzycki SSJ; front row from left, Shelley Butler, Mary Palamar, Sharon Evelyne Mazzola; middle row from left, Lynn Miller CSJ, Nina Hershey, Mary Ellen Gondeck CSJ; back row from left, Connie Pillner and Jack Pillner. Not pictured: Jimmy Dunn*

grasped the hand of her little boy whose hair appeared bleached blonde, but in reality was showing signs of malnutrition. Witnessing her suffering and anguish, tears formed in my eyes, and I felt a compassion that surprised me by its depth and seemed to flow out of memories buried in the haven of my heart. You see, my mother struggled with a similar decision. In the 1960s, on a small farm in Poland, my family of six children lived in poverty and my mother sent me to live with my aunt and uncle in America. When I visited her about 20 years later, she still regretted her decision, even though she knew that I did receive all that was promised and so much more. I was one of the *lucky ones*. As with my experience, I am overwhelmed by the depth and power of this mother's love, willing to embrace the suffering of the loss of her children in the hope of a better life for them."

Restavek students, (*who were lucky to be in school a couple of hours each day*) lined up in twos as they entered the courtyard to meet us — the visitors. "We could see the depth of emotions on their faces and in their body language," said Sister Celeste. "Some seemed ashamed, not looking at the Americans who were there to meet them, some stood withdrawn or with defiant stances and others glanced up with shy and inquisitive looks. Sharon and I moved instinctively down to meet the children. I feared that if I didn't go down to meet them, I would only reinforce their experience of being *unseen and unimportant*. Walking up to some of the girls who were shyly looking at me, I said, 'Hello,' in English, elicited some giggles and asked if they would like to have a *foto*. With a shy look, they began to pose and laughed as they looked at their images in the

camera. I wish that I could say every child said, 'Yes,' but some remained withdrawn and distant. I hoped my presence in the courtyard would communicate my recognition of their inherent dignity and worth, but this experience with the Restaveks continues to disquiet my heart as I wonder how such a system can be tolerated and what can be done to dismantle it further. As with many times in Haiti, I am faced with an injustice and a cycle of poverty that seem almost overwhelming and challenges me to believe in a God who is actively permeating all with His mercy and in time will *heal all wounds*.

"The immersion trip to Haiti was both a gift and a challenge," shared Sister Sharon. "I witnessed hope, potential and possibilities for recovery at each place we visited. Knowing that I was in Haiti, carrying the love and support of the U.S. Federation of Sisters of Saint Joseph and the thousands of folks back home who championed this cause, I began to dream of even more possibilities."

Sister Celeste learned much while in Haiti and continued learning through her reflection on the experience. "I embarked on this courageous venture to Haiti expecting to return with a desire to simplify my life and maybe empty a few boxes, but Haiti taught me much more about how we, Sisters of Saint Joseph, are called to be a ministry of presence. When I encountered the Restavek children, with their pain and shame reflected on their faces and in their eyes, I moved instinctively, like a woman sent on a mission, into the courtyard to be with them. I was sent. Compelled by the Gospel and our SSJ mission of *being one with*, I desired to stand with them, on a footing of mutuality,

as givers and receivers of God's healing grace. Hopeful that my simple gestures of a smile, a hello and an offer of a *foto* would let them know what I didn't know how to say in Creole and feared that they have not heard too often: you are loved, respected and good, no matter what you have experienced in your life. You are the face of God for me. In Haiti, I realized how much our charism of 'being one with' empowers us not to separate ourselves from the dear neighbor, but to stand with those in need even when it stretches us far beyond our comfort zones to a place of love."

*Reflections on the trip to Haiti and video clips of the visit by Sisters Celeste and Sharon are available at: <http://ssjphila.org/new/news/this-months-news>*



*Celeste Mokrzycki SSJ presents a student with a new dress.*

# The Community Responds with Gifts for Haitians

Upon learning that she would participate in the immersion trip to Haiti, Sister Sharon White SSJ invited others to share in the experience by donating items to be gifted to Haitians. Sister Sharon's call to action received an overwhelming response that filled six large suitcases.

"St. Timothy Parish in Philadelphia adopted Haiti in response to Pope Francis' call to the Year of Mercy," said Sister Sharon. "These parishioners joined people from St. Hubert High School and several Sisters of Saint Joseph to create more than 150 pillow-case dresses. Villa Maria Joseph Academy spent two days weaving 300 bracelets.

The Philadelphia Phillies, Philadelphia Union, Aramark, Beneficial Bank and the Congregation donated shirts and hats. Individuals gave sewing notions, clothing, filtered water bottles, nail polish, ribbons, toys, stickers, whiffle bats and balls, crayons and coloring books.

A local dentist donated 250 toothbrushes. Monetary donations paid the airline baggage charges."

**Left column from top:**  
St. Hubert High School students show dresses sewn for the Haitian children.

**Villa Resident, Sister St. Herman D'Uva,**  
sews a dress to be donated.

**Haitian student shows off her new nail polish and bracelet.**

**Right column from top:**  
Villa Maria Joseph Academy students show bracelets they made and donated.

**Jameson Hall and McKenzie Kramer, Community Outreach at Citizens Bank Park,** present donated logoed clothing to Sharon White SSJ.

**A Haitian girl is thrilled with her new dress.**

**Pictured bottom:** Haitian boys show off Phillies shirts and bracelets.



Photo: Carole Pollock SSJ



Photo: Carole Pollock SSJ



Photo: Carole Pollock SSJ



Photo: Carole Pollock SSJ

