

Sharon Gaskell – A day in the life of Starthrower Foundation

Friday, July 25, 2008

“*Salu!* This is Friday, our QUIET day of the week here at Lakay Fondasyon. Monday to Thursday, there are another 15 student staff members.

“Some days begin with a whimper, some a bang. This Friday, I woke at 4 a.m. to the song of the roosters. Tentatively I move my head from side to side to judge the stage of my ear infection. In the absence of the hum of electricity, every sound seems to stand in relief.

“Six gunshots ring out in succession, from the street adjoining us to the rear. I hear the murmur of voices, running feet, 2 more shots from a greater distance, so I finish my meditation, yoga stretches and rise. After opening doors, feeding all animals, filling water pots to boil, sorting laundry loads, I prepare the work list for the day.

“As it was extensive, I phone Jackson the taxi driver and ‘make a price’ for his services for the day: \$800 Haitian (4000 gourdes – \$115 USD)

“Jackson and staff arrive at 8 a.m. Wisky goes off in the cab to purchase 6 bags of ice and phone cards. Joceline and Erzilia prepare supplies to take to the laundromat, and move all to the gallery. Jack and I confer. I give him funds and ask him to purchase one case of notebooks (desperately needed by many of our students), or two cases, if the price hasn’t risen too dramatically.

“He would travel in with Jackson, Erzilia, Joceline, to help unload at the Laundromat (Lave-la) and then go with Jackson to purchase the books, put them in the trunk and return to work via kamyonet. Wisky and Jackson return from the store empty handed — no ice available and no phone cards available. Jack will check for phone cards in town.

“I get a phone call 30 minutes after they leave -- no electricity in town, so Laundromat will ‘balanse delco-a’ (start the generator) if no hydro by 11 a.m. In the interim, they sit and wait. I ask Jack to stay with Jackson and the women, and then everyone can return home together with the notebooks.

“At 10:30 a.m., another phone call. No notebooks for sale in the city, no phone cards. Ask everyone to just return home.

“Here at home Carmene is cleaning, and Wisky is working in the garden. Auguste is meeting with 6 youth on the gallery, each with a different need: Results are out for gême, Philo and Rhèto but the schools won’t release results without money. Good thing I am going to the bank as results cost \$40 Haitian (\$6 USD) each.

“Althega arrives, and tells us he has a vicious headache, so Carmene and I make sandwiches and put plates together for everyone while Auguste does the interviews and bookwork. Sherline, Christamene, Rodney, Kenson, Gino and Martha head to their respective schools. On tap taps.

“Althega recovers slightly after food, water, comprime (ibuprofen) and rest with a cold cloth, so Auguste goes to the street with him, finds another, different taxi, makes a price to deliver him home (\$120 Haitian).

Jackson’s taxi arrives from town, and everyone, including the laundry, disembarks. Jackson has a sandwich and a cold drink, and he and I head to the bank. I sit for an hour at the bank, in the office of a very nice man who is trying to track down a wire transfer from Canada. He speaks French until finally I tell him I speak only Kreyol or English. “Menm ou se kanadyen-nan,non?” (“But you’re Canadian!”)

“Alas the bank wire transfer seems to be lost. He tries 3 different telephones (one land line, 2 cell phones from different companies) and all cut him off. Perhaps you could please come back Monday? he asks. Of course. This is Haiti.

At the Lakay in Cap-Haitien

“Jackson takes me back to the house, knowing I am almost late for our home visits which have been set for a week. In our absence, Jack and Wisky have traveled by kamyonet to Champin for ice. The truck arrived as they did! Unable to find a taxi to return home, they struggle with 6 bags of ice on a tap-tap, losing about 20 percent to melting.

“Plenitude has arrived from Grand Riviere du Nord. He is joyful because he passed Philo, sad because his dad died Monday, before learning of his exam results. I take the time to sit with him and listen. Plenitude’s mother died when he was too young to remember her. His dad died in their ti kay of tuberculosis (madadi bwonchi).

“Three other students have arrived asking for money for school fees and one I think has Malaria. As I sit with Plenitude, I quietly call for Mme Carmene to make more sandwiches. The phone rings and text message arrives from Sen Rafayel with results.

“Auguste and I have to leave for home visits so we give explanations to those waiting. All choose to sit and wait, so Erzilia takes over in the office, and we head out with Jackson to Petit-anse to visit Camiose and then Anniel.

“Auguste’s phone rings – it is Kenson, who is using a friend’s phone. [Kenson is an orphan living with Gran, and who was sent to us by another organization for the ‘soutyen’ (support) we provide our youth. An expensive reputation for us, as no funds accompany their request. Kenson had been failing at school and not attending, so I took

him on the condition that we could make tutoring mandatory in exchange for accessing all of our programs.]

“I could hear Kenson shouting in excitement from my place in the back seat. “Mwen bon, mwen bon” (I passed! I passed!). Auguste, Jackson and I all shout back, “Bat bravo, konpliman” What a brief, shining moment!

Camiose meets us on the street and guides to her house in the interior. The taxi is physically unable to enter as the route consists of car-size mud filled ruts. A high, 4 wheel drive is necessary to manage these streets. We walk the rest of the way.

“Her mother greets us, a frail, 30 something woman. There are 8 children, half of whom are nieces and nephews. She took them in when her sister and brother-in-law died. She has a precious treadle sewing machine and shyly tells us that she is a seamstress.

“The house has one single cot, no mosquito net, the children except the youngest, sleep on the cement floor. She is buying the 2 room house “piti piti” (a little at a time) with her sewing money. She looks so ill in addition to severely malnourished. There is a filthy, shallow well -- a latrine almost full and shared space with another family for cooking in the space in front of the toilet.

“As we thank Mme for her hospitality, Anniel shows up to guide us to his place. It is not too far, also inaccessible by taxi. Similarly his house has no window, a shallow contaminated well, outdoor cooking. He tells us he studies on the roof. Anyone who has a cement roof does. Tol (corrugated metal) roofs cannot be used.

“The latrine, his mother tells us, has enough room. It has a filthy piece of cloth strung across the opening. From my vantage point I can see pieces of note book pages lying on the floor. Anniel told me that he studied there sometimes when it was too hot for the roof. When he wrote each exam, he tore up the notebooks for toilet paper (papye igenik) for everyone to use.

“There are so many poignant moments in every day that it is impossible for me to recount them all.

“There are also 9 in Anniel’s family — no dad, he is staying in the house of an aunt and uncle. This ti kay was absolutely a haven for every mosquito (marengwen, bigay) in the North! We were literally swarmed as we walked through and around the kay.

“Back in the taxi for home. Jackson has the radio on and it’s playing a song by Shania Twain; the refrain croons “Look how far we’ve come, my baby”. I have heard the song many times but never heard the words.

“For some reason this time they speak to me of Haiti and her children, and I am moved to tears. Home visits do that to me -- keep me grounded, focused. We set up visits for every Friday so I always have a great deal of reflection material for the weekend.

Back home Joceline and Erzilia are impatient to get to the laundromat. It is now 1 p.m. Auguste does a post secondary consult with Plenitude while I fill out medical consult form for Othanes. We'll send him to Dr. B for a private consult as the clinics are closed. He will have to go back tomorrow for lab work. In the meantime, we give him a little food, water and something for pain. If I had a medical degree, I would start him on Chloroquin for Malaria.

Auguste brings me up to speed on what Plenitude would like to do, post secondary. I take over and talk money, letting him know that we will support him to go to Port-au-Prince to register and write entrance exams at both Universite d'etat and Universite Kiskeya to study Agriculture. However, if he is successful at the entrance exams, we cannot guarantee the funds to put him through.

“Like all Haitian young people, they will always take a small piece of hope rather than sit. We currently have 5 in post secondary institutions – a miracle – and another 9 waiting for sponsors to go on. These kids are beating all the odds in COMPLETING secondary. I stand in awe. “In the meantime Auguste has taken Othanes down to the street, found a taxi and agreed on a price. Although we do not work Saturday, he will come to the house with test results and I will dispense prescriptions from our little “dispensaire” (medical cupboard).

“We close at 2 p.m. but the kids just keep coming, everyone except Martha with a huge smile. Everyone was “admi” or “bon” except her. She is very disappointed. She wants to be a nurse. She shouldn't be disappointed, though. This school year she nursed her brother Gino through 2 bouts of Malaria with parasites and UTI infections.

“The laundry taxi arrives at 3:15 – Joceline and Erzilia depart. I head to Champin with Jackson to buy toilet paper. When I return, Jack is ready with Lucy (our very sick mother cat), in the carrying case ready to go to the vet. We have been going every other day for almost 2 weeks, Both she and Charlie Brown (her brother) have bacterial infections in the blood. If not for Dr. Denaud (only vet in the north of Haiti), both would have died. And our cats are vital in controlling mice, rats, cockroaches, etc

“Auguste and I sit down with a glass of ice water (what a gift!) and a dish of peanuts to debrief from the day; at 5 p.m., Jack, Jackson and Lucy arrive. The vet says Lucy's temp is coming down but she not out of the woods yet. Jackson and Jack join us for a glass of ice water. We debrief for another half hour and at 5:30 (we close at 2 . . .) Auguste leaves on his bike for Haut de Cap and Jackson delivers Jack to his house.

“For those who ask “Why do you need a vehicle – isn’t that a luxury?” I can only respond “You are right. We do not need a vehicle, we need two or three.” We’ll take one good used one for now” – and the hunt continues.

“Lucy (the cat) has soiled the plastic carrying case so it’s time for me to wash the towel and scrub the cage. Then it’s feed the animals, feed myself, clean up the kitchen, lock up, sponge bath (I would give anything for a shower!) and fall into bed. Still no electricity. I would give anything for a fan, too!

“I read by flashlight, thanks to Cindy in Pennsylvania, who has sent new reading material this week. I fall asleep about 9 pm to be wakened at midnight by the crazy rooster next door who thinks it is 4 am. I have to chuckle. Sometimes my life in Haiti feels like living in a Dali painting.