



Hope for Furcy

Built thirty years ago with the help of Covenant World Relief and North Park students, one school in the mountains of Haiti has not only survived, but has exceeded expectations.

BOB SMIETANA

We made spaghetti for the whole village on the last night in the mountaintop Haitian community of Furcy, a meal cooked in a massive iron pot over a wood fire and served on the last of the paper plates we'd brought all the way from Chicago.

For a week we had hauled bags of concrete and loads of cinder block to construct a small kitchen for the L'École Méthodiste de Furcy, a small Christian school built the year before with the help of students from North Park University and funded by Covenant World Relief. We'd also painted walls in the school, made repairs to a mountain-side fish pond, and played endless games of soccer on a small stretch of level ground beside the school.

Now it was time to say goodbye. So we all gathered around the grounds of the school and the small Methodist church next door for one last time with our new friends.

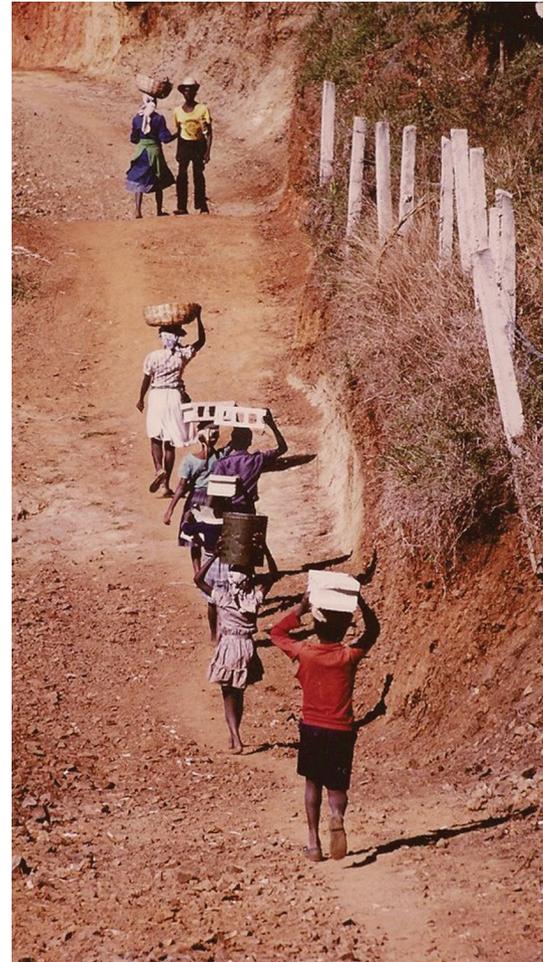
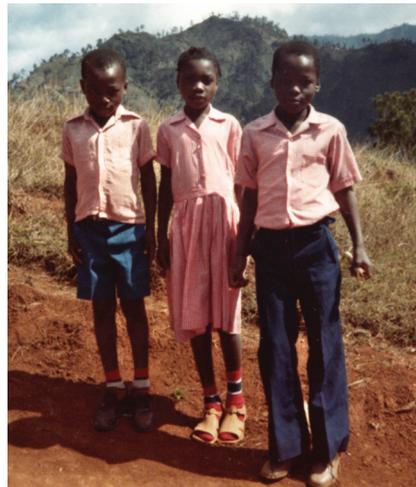
The meal took some time to pull off. For one thing, it takes quite a while to boil water for spaghetti with a wood fire. And

even when all the food was ready, no one from the community would eat until all had been served.

Once all had finally eaten, the Rev. Alain Rocourt, a leader of the Methodist church in Haiti and our host for the week, stood to bless us and send our group of about twenty North Parkers back home. There had been no bread or wine at that last supper, Rocourt told us. But eating together and sharing each other's company had been a kind of communion. It was a spiritual bond that transcended our differences, so that though we were young and old, rich and poor, Haitian and American, still we were bound in the love of Christ. That love would connect us even when we parted, said Rocourt.

Then he invited us to sing a familiar hymn, in English and French: "Bind us together Lord, bind us together, with cords that cannot be broken."

That memory from March of 1985 came to mind this past November, when I received an email from Doug Nystrom, a member of North Park Covenant Church in Chicago who had been one of the lead-



ers of that trip. After many years of hearing nothing about the school in Furcy—whether it even still existed—he had news.

For the past several years, Nystrom had occasionally searched for information about the school without any luck. Last fall a Google search turned up a website for Mountains of Hope for Haiti, a small nonprofit that works in Furcy.

Nystrom contacted Wendy Vencuss, a Methodist pastor in Connecticut who with her husband began Mountains of Hope a few years ago. He asked about the school.

Amazingly, it was still thriving, despite all the turmoil of the last twenty-eight years in Haiti. It had survived a revolution, years of political unrest, and the economic collapse that followed the 2010 earthquake that leveled the capital of Port-au-Prince.

Despite the hardship and the extreme poverty in the community, the school was still educating about 150 students every year. And the little

cookhouse we had worked on still served a hot meal every day, often the best and sometimes the only meal those students get.

The bad news was that Hurricane Sandy had torn the roof nearly off of the school. Despite the damage, the school was still functioning. Vencuss said fixing the roof was an engineering task beyond the skills of local residents. But they were determined that school stay open. So they stretched some blue hurricane tarps over the building and re-opened the school for classes.

Vencuss hopes to raise the more than \$3,000 to fix the roof and additional funds for scholarships in the coming months. But the community will not wait for that to happen. “It’s really amazing how they keep going,” she said. “It really is something.”

Anyone who has visited Furcy could tell you that Vencuss is right. The school there has a history of exceeding anyone’s expectations.

And it began with a simple act of

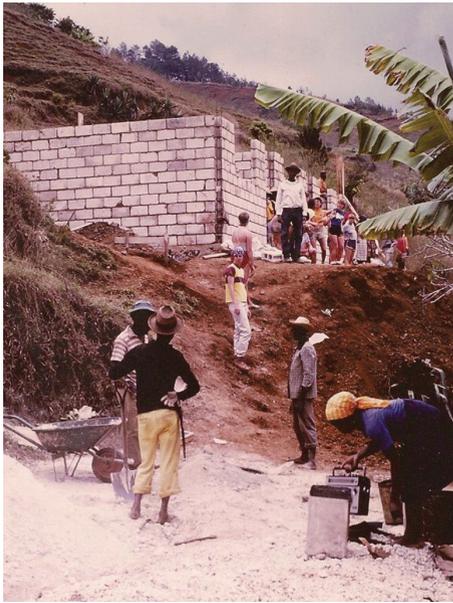
Clockwise from top left: The first wall of the school goes up in the spring of 1984. Women carry water and building materials up mountain paths to the worksite. By the spring of 1985, children who had been attending the school since the previous fall and receiving at least one good meal a day were no longer showing signs of malnutrition. Participants in the 1985 trip included, clockwise from bottom left, Mel Soneson (North Park professor), John Egan, Bob Smietana, and Doug Nystrom.

faith on the part of Rocourt, with help from his nephew Robert Boncy, who taught at North Park in the early eighties, and the support of Covenant World Relief (CWR) and enthusiastic college students.

For years Rocourt had been visiting Furcy, a village about twenty miles outside of Port-au-Prince, accessible only by poorly maintained roads. There’s no running water or electricity, and most people eke out a living by farming, despite the area’s poor soil and uneven terrain.

In the spring of 1983 with a grant

Bob Smietana is a North Park graduate who took part in the 1985 Haiti trip. A former features editor for the *Companion*, he is the religion writer for the *Tennessean* newspaper in Nashville.



from CWR, Boncy helped lead a group of seventeen North Parkers to Furcy to build a fish pond to provide an alternative food source. It was the first of four trips that students would take to the mountain community.

The following year, with \$25,000 from CWR, they began to build a school, which was finished in the months that followed. Along with teaching the students, the school served a hot meal every day.

That small change began to transform the life of kids in Furcy, said Nystrom, who went on three of the four trips.

“When we started work on the school, there were kids in the community who were suffering from starvation,” said Nystrom, “with reddish tinged hair and swollen bellies.”

When North Parkers returned a year later, the signs of starvation among the kids had been reversed, he said. At one point Nystrom walked out to the four-wheel-drive truck that the team had rented for the week and found a young boy named John trying to scratch his name into the truck’s fender.

“I remember how thrilled I was,” he said. “He was one of those kids who was starving a year earlier. Now not only was he not starving, he was becoming literate!”

Still the signs of poverty remained. For many of the North Park students, it was the first time they’d ever seen poverty face to face.

Sandy Nelson, who was part of the 1985 North Park trip, said she was struck by the sight of women hauling water up the mountain each day to their homes. “I can’t begin to convey the thoughts and feelings I have from my time here. The people here live on the land, these mountains are their life,” she wrote in the journal she kept during the trip.

“Their whole existence depends on the mountains, the few trees, the dry earth, and the few crops they are able to raise. They have to work unbelievably hard just to live each day. It’s an incredible sight to see the women carrying huge baskets or pails of water on their heads, walking barefoot on the footpaths that go precariously up and down and around the rocky hillsides. I wonder what they are thinking as they make the long, tedious trip to the water hole over and over again.”

The memories of that trip motivated Nelson to become involved in nonprofits that assist people living in the developing world. She’s a volunteer graphic artist with Water First International, a Seattle-based nonprofit with ties to a number of Covenanters.

She also learned something of the resilience of the people of Furcy during her time there. “The people there



The first room of the school was built with the help of North Park students (top left). Construction continued on a second building behind the first (top). Hurricane Sandy tore the roof off the original building (above).

were grateful for our visit, were joyous even in the midst of hardship, and the children were absolutely enchanting,” she said in a recent email. “I’ll never forget the way they sang for us: stunning voices singing loudly with joy and thanksgiving. They even taught us a song that I still remember: *lire bible, prier chaque jours, si tu veux grandir* (read the Bible, pray every day, if you want to grow).”

That resilience in the face of hardship also stuck with Rob Hall, who was part of the last trip, made in 1987. Hall, who is now vice-president for real estate services for the Evangelical Covenant Church, said he learned the need to put his faith into action. He eventually spent nine years working with Habitat for Humanity before coming to work for the Covenant Church.



The 1984 North Park team, led by professors Mel Soneson (standing, third from left) and Robert Bony (center, leaning forward), and Covenant pastors Eldon Johnson and Ron Magnuson (standing, third from right and top right)

More information about the Furcy school can be found at mountainsofhopeforhaiti.org

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“Little things that I took for granted, such as clean drinking water, were a luxury for the people we worked with in Haiti,” he said. “That had a profound effect on me as it challenged me to look more in depth at what Jesus said about our relationship to the poor. My time in Haiti definitely shaped how I viewed the gospel and its role in the world today.”

A pastor once said that every small step of obedience opens up space for God to work in our world. That

Plans for more projects were interrupted in late 1987 because of political instability in Haiti. The ties with the school in Furcy were lost not long afterward. Rocourt was forced to leave the country after armed thugs attacked his home with guns and grenades.

He had been a member of his home country’s electoral council, which made him a target after elections were cancelled by violence on November 29, 1987. He escaped an attack on his house and went into hiding. Later he was smuggled onto a plane with the help of a friend who worked for American Airlines, said Bony.

Rocourt visited North Park in 1988, to thank the students and staff there for their friendship and prayer. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, he thanked Tim Heintzelman, who was then North Park’s chaplain and who had been part of two of the trips to Haiti. Heintzelman, now pastor of Faith Covenant Church in Westerville, Ohio, had called Rocourt as the elections neared and told the Haitian leader that he and other North Parkers were praying for him.

“It was the very voice of God at that very moment of despair,” Rocourt said. “It seems to me that God comes to me in many wonderful

ways.”

Rocourt was unable to return to Haiti and spent the rest of his ministry assisting immigrants in Miami. He died in 2002. But his dream for the students of Furcy is still alive.

After teaching at North Park, Bony went on to work for USAID, the government’s foreign assistance agency. He, too, heard from Nystrom last fall, and how the school had not only survived, but thrived in the intervening years. In December, while attending a family funeral in Haiti, Bony returned to Furcy for the first time in nearly three decades. There he saw a community leader named Elius Brevil, whom he had first met in the 1980s. Despite the years apart, the two men immediately recognized each other.

“He said, ‘I am Pastor Rocourt—we are all Pastor Rocourt,’” Bony said. “It was an unforgettable moment for me.”

Bony said that he and Wendy Vencuss have begun discussing plans to repair the school and to expand it in the future. The school will only succeed if people in the community continue to take leadership, he said. But the fact that it has persevered so long, in such difficult circumstances, amazes him.

“These people who are scraping by—in a very challenging rural environment,” he said. “You want to lend a hand.” ■



Robert Bony and Elius Brevil reunited last December when Bony returned to Furcy.

statement seems to have come to life in Furcy.

The school began with an act of faith on the part of Rocourt and his nephew Robert. Covenant World Relief believed in the project enough to invest in building a fish pond, the school, a cookhouse, and additional projects, including pig pens and a print shop to serve other Haitian schools.