

# My Time in Haiti

The reflection of a 19-year-old on the CHRF team who just returned from Haiti

CJ's journey was completed just days before the devastating earthquake which destroyed most of the country - as well as the hotel he had slept in just a few days before.



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# Haiti Journal

## December 17-21

### Day One: Arrival

Upon landing on the tarmac of Port-au-Prince, Haiti, I wasn't sure what to expect. Everything that I had read and heard about Haiti was that it was one of the world's garbage dumps, the pit and poorest country of the Western Hemisphere. The statistics that I had read were unbelievable, around 45% of the children die before the age of 15! Tens of thousands of children and people are said to face hunger and starvation everyday. After hearing and reading reports like these I decided to investigate on behalf of Children's Hunger Relief Fund and find out how we can help put an end to these horrific conditions.

The drive from the airport to our home base was anything but ordinary. The roads changed from smoothly paved concrete to outright dangerous conditions with dirt, steep climbs and sharp rocks substituting for a street. Our driver assured us that our four-wheel drive would stand up to the challenge (although upon arrival at our base we found out that we had managed the final portion of the trip with a flat tire).

Because of our late arrival and the incredibly slow time it takes to travel in Haiti (about two hours by car for every thirty miles if you are traveling near the city streets) we went straight to dinner and met with one of our partners, Donald, a great man dedicated to improving the conditions for as many children and families in Haiti as he can.

At dinner we went through our itinerary and planned inspections for the next three days. Unfortunately, no stories, videos or pictures can accurately explain what was to come, but they can provide a taste for the shocking events and circumstances that occur in Haiti on a daily basis.

### Day Two: La Digue

We embarked early from Port-au-Prince to set out to La Digue, a town miles out of the main city and tucked away in one of the many rural parts of the country, where CHRF donors make it possible for us to fund and support one of our most exciting projects. Here the superb staff and faculty run not only an outstanding and highly renowned school, but also a medical clinic that serves the local community as well as a greatly organized feeding program.

At school the children learn English and receive vocational training preparing them for their possible careers in whatever field they choose. A good amount of the teachers are fluent in English and everyone has a tender spot in their heart for these suffering children. We were greeted by each class with a special welcoming song and pictures that the children had drawn displaying their gratitude.

After visiting the school we made our way to the clinic where the local community goes to in times of emergency. The power supply at the clinic is not exactly reliable however. Imagine yourself or a loved one right in the middle of a dangerous operation and all of the sudden the proper and necessary machinery is turned off! Thankfully the clinic has now been provided with a new generator so that surgeries may be performed uninterrupted. The clinic



also serves as a “de-worming” station for the surrounding towns and provides their service for thousands, free of charge. We stepped into the waiting room and were shocked to find dozens of children and families waiting to be de-wormed. The clinic is used to seeing large numbers like this and has provided a much needed service to the local community.

After departing from the clinic we walked across the compound in order to help out with the feeding program. Here, hundreds of children are fed a healthy meal and are potentially saved from starvation. Children’s Hunger Relief Fund takes great pride in our donors for assisting in providing these children with life saving meals. Although it’s hard to imagine, 5 cents feeds a child in Haiti, so with every dollar donated YOU can feed 20 hungry kids!



After lunch several members of the team gave out soccer balls to the kids that we had brought all the way from the United States. Soccer is Haiti’s sport of choice and the kids went hysterical upon seeing their new Christmas gifts.

The entire operation in La Digue is incredible providing the community with education, work skills, an opportunity to seek treatment at their clinic and a life saving feeding program. Thank YOU CHRF donors for making our contribution to this terrific project possible.

Next up we went over to a nearby orphanage where we were surprised to find that the boys had to sleep outside of the main building in tents. The stories of each of the children were heart breaking. Most of the children’s parents had died from various diseases when they were around the age of three. Some of them had simply been abandoned and had been rescued by the workers at the orphanage.

We talked with one five-year-old boy who had lost both his parents when he was three years old. His parents were murdered bystanders of a brutal gang fight near the city of Port-au-Prince. When we asked him what does he want to be someday he thought for a minute and responded, “I just want to grow up”. This answer took us all by surprise. The statistic of nearly half the children of Haiti dying before the age of 15 wasn’t just a statistic after all. For this little boy his dream and fantasy were simply to live long enough to be an adult. Thanks to our workers at the orphanage and your support this boy’s simple wish for life is becoming true one day at a time.

### **Day Three: A Few Shelters More**

Today we inspected several different orphanages and schools visiting the children, giving them small gifts like soccer balls and candy and wishing them a Merry Christmas.

Around noon our team set foot into a typical Haitian market with thousands of scurrying locals looking for items on their lists. The market reeked of dead animals and dirt nicely enhanced by the blistering heat of the country. While walking through the food portion of the market we stumbled upon a disturbing Haitian delicacy.

The locals, tortured from piercing hunger, have resorted to making and selling “mud pies” for food. Don’t mistake this item for our delicious caramel treat; the children of Haiti have their own set of ingredients. First, they find fresh mud and add a bit of grease or oil to the mud, then, for preparation they simply place the mud in



the sun until it is sufficiently baked, after that the children chow down. I have heard stories of children eating strange things before but resorting to mud I have never in my wildest dreams (or in this case, nightmares) anticipated. After seeing mud pies for sale in the market our purpose and mission to bring food to the children of this nation became increasingly more important to me.

As we concluded our walk around the market and began our trip to the next project yet another incredible image stopped me in my tracks. This time it was the conditions and dirtiness of the sea and rivers where the people bathed and washed their clothes. The shores were completely covered by trash; the beaches were literally stacked tall by garbage. The rivers and ocean itself looked as if Haiti had taken all their waste and poured it out over the water's surface. The nightmare continued, all the stories I had heard about Haiti were true.

The next three stops at rescue centers proved to be some of the hardest moments to bear in my life. First, we visited another orphanage, while the rest of the team followed the director for a guided tour I hung back and played with kids.

Unfortunately most of them weren't familiar with rock, paper scissors and weren't amused but we did manage to have a few good rounds of paddy cake and hide and seek. It wasn't until the car ride to our next stop that I found out that each of these children were infected with HIV.

The information hit me like a ton of bricks. The little children that I had just been playing with could each die very soon if AIDS symptoms appear and they don't receive the needed medication. Those moments I shared with the kids laughing, smiling and playing silly games will remain stored away in my memory forever. The realization that these kids could possibly be facing death at anytime and still manage to laugh and have fun blows me away. These children, and the counselors who care for them, are an inspiration to me and bring a whole new appreciation to the life that we have.

Next we visited a small orphanage and rescue center that provides for a few dozen children found helpless on the urban streets. As we talked with the manager of the center he told us the story of a little girl living there. Both of her parents were brutally murdered in front of her eyes just months prior to our visit. The shock and trauma of witnessing her parent's death has left her quiet and horrified. Our hope is that she finds comfort in the love and care of the people that are now taking care of her. It's children like these that make our work so important.

Finally, at our last stop and food delivery, we found a baby child who had just recently learned to walk nearby to the rescue center. The little boy was screaming and crying from pain, both his eyes had been infected and if hadn't received treatment he would soon permanently go blind. The price for the medication to heal his infection was twelve dollars and fifty cents. Our team quickly found the money to pay for the necessary medication. For only \$12.50 the little boy will regain sight and grow up with his vision.





## **Day Four: Final Day on the Ground.**

Today we traveled to an area of the country called Cazale, which was secluded, by surrounding mountains. Here Children's Hunger Relief Fund supports a clinic that consistently provides emergency and medical care for around 10,000 locals. Over the past decade the clinic is estimated to have served around 97,000 people!

Because of the lack of opportunity for good medical attention in Haiti the nurses informed us that families from surrounding villages walk FOURTEEN hours just to seek treatment. First, imagine having to walk fourteen hours, now consider that these people are making the expedition because they are already sick and who knows what type of pain they are going through as they make the long journey.

Nevertheless the clinic is a life saving addition to this area of the country. Hundreds of births are overseen and the clinic staff sees about one hundred patients a day for various needs.

The clinic doesn't just provide for children and send them back on their way however. The staff has set up a "rehabilitation station" where children can remain for as long as necessary before going back to their families. Many of the children need to be delicately taken care of after they have had severe cases of malnutrition and their bodies face many of the devastating symptoms such as a swollen abdomen and unusual water retention which causes parts of their bodies to expand. Sadly, in the case of some of the children that we met, their heads had swollen from water retention the image of these poor children is quite disturbing.



Thankfully, with the loving touch of local staff and volunteers that visit, these children can be nursed back to health.

## **Overview**

There are no highways in Haiti, no freeways and barely any roads. People walk over fourteen hours to seek medical care. Children bake mud-pies so that they can fill their stomachs. Children are orphaned by senseless murder. Thousands of children go hungry until they starve. But what really surprised me is that this is all happening just over a few hundred miles off our Florida Coast! The proximity of this type of devastating poverty is almost unbelievable but incredibly, its true. On behalf of Children's Hunger Relief Fund, Thank You for your continued support of our projects in Haiti and others like them around the world. Together we have sent 530,000 dollars worth of supplies to Haiti in 2009! We are a group dedicated to ending this suffering, both immediately, by providing life saving meals and emergency care, and, in the long run by providing the future leaders of their nation with a strong education. As we said to every child we visited in school, "we hope that one day you will give to your neighbor in need as we have given to you".