



■ **Nannette Canniff of Randolph shares talks with Sister Rosa after 6 a.m. Mass at St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church in Fond des Blancs, Haiti. Canniff has been traveling to Haiti for 20 years to help the people of a remote region.**

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It is 5:20 a.m. The church bells sound.

Every morning, at more or less the same time, someone rings the bells at St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church that nudge people from their sleep.

Alarm clocks, if they exist at all, are rare in Fond des Blancs. As you lie there, listening to the bells, you wonder: Who wakes the man who wakes the village?

The donkeys still bray, the chickens still cluck, the dogs still howl, the same as when you fell asleep the night before.

At 6 o'clock, the bells chime again, as if someone hit the snooze button. This time, they are beckoning people to Mass.

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The white, concrete church in the center of Fond des Blancs is crammed with people on Sundays; at least that is what you are told. On this weekday, six Americans are joined by 15 Haitians.

The Americans spread out in the pews, leaving several feet between them. Across the aisle, the Haitians squeeze close together even though more than half the rows are empty. It's as though they won't take more than they need of anything, even when it's empty space.

The Mass is said in French, for years the only official language of Haiti. For the homily, the priest switches to Creole, the language people speak.

A scraggly dog wanders in through an open door and struts around the church. No one seems to notice.

A lone woman begins a song, quietly at first. Others join in, their voices gaining strength, as if shaking off the sleep.

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You spot a boy wandering along the dirt road in a royal blue New York Giants T-shirt. Another man wears an MIT shirt, though he may never have heard of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. It is a bizarre juxtaposition of American culture and Third World poverty, but it doesn't seem to matter to the Haitians.

The clothes are second-hand and the Haitians call them "Kennedys" because they began arriving from the United States when John F. Kennedy was president. Many do not know the meaning of the English words and logos on the fronts and backs of the shirts.

Father Jerry, the name universally used for the Rev. Gerald Osterman, the Catholic priest who helped start the St. Boniface Haiti Foundation, laughs when he tells of the message one local man innocently wore into church on his T-shirt. The man rose during Mass to read the scripture, and Father Jerry read: "My memory is failing me. Can I just call you ass . . . ?"

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It's just stopped pouring and the sport utility vehicle you're riding in is churning through mud several inches deep. The SUV crawls up a hill and inches along a road that hugs the mountain.

The turns are tight, and the vehicle fishtails as its wheels spin in the mud. You look to the right, and all you see is the long, long drop.

Back at the hospital, the parking lot is full. At least a dozen donkeys are tied to trees, waiting for the march home. You wonder: Maybe there are times when donkey is better than 4-wheel drive.

A study of hope and **FAITH**



■ **Canniff reaches out to children whose sister died of dehydration. She has 10 children of her own.**



■ **Canniff greets a parishioner named Elda after Mass. She says she feels as comfortable in Haiti as she does on the South Shore.**



■ **Canniff bids farewell to Sister Marielle, who is being reassigned after working at St. Boniface Hospital for four years.**



■ **A devout Catholic, Canniff says she thanks God for the opportunity to serve the Haitian people.**

Randolph woman an unlikely savior of Haiti's poor and downtrodden

FOND DES BLANCS, Haiti
Nannette Canniff stands outside St. Boniface Hospital and is preparing for the journey back to her Randolph home when a 20-year-old man approaches. The side of his face is swollen and his jaw juts out awkwardly where a tumor grows beneath the skin.

He walked for two days to see Canniff, who has dedicated the past 20 years to helping people in Haiti's back country.

She is his only hope for surgery to remove the tumor and reclaim some semblance of a normal life. After a short conversation, he hands Canniff an X-ray of his jaw. She promises to take it to a Milton dentist to see what, if anything, can be done to help him.

Canniff, 66, is an unlikely savior. But here in a remote region of southwest Haiti, that is exactly the role she plays.

"Nannette good, good to me," Jeanine Lajoie said after Mass one day. The mother of six speaks only a few words of English, but she is persistent when she tries to explain how Canniff has arranged to send her children to school and is helping to pay for a concrete house to replace the mud one her family lives in.

"She's been helping for a long, long time," Lajoie said, "a very long time."

A slight woman with short hair and glasses, Canniff could be anyone's mother or grandmother. Except for the trips to Haiti.

She is the executive director of the St. Boniface Haiti Foundation. For the former EKG technician and doctor's office assistant, it is a full-time job.

During the past two decades, Canniff has visited Haiti every year, save a short time in the mid-'90s when a U.S. embargo prevented Americans from traveling to the country. She now visits at least four times annually, sometimes for as long as five

weeks.

In 1990, she brought home a 13-year-old Haitian boy who had been badly burned. When she found him in a Port-au-Prince hospital, raw, red flesh oozed from beneath the charred remains of his skin.

Ernst Sajous lived with Canniff and her family through years of surgeries. He never left. Sajous, now 27 and a South Shore construction worker, calls Canniff mom.

Canniff, her husband, Fred, and their 10 children were living in public housing in Quincy's Germantown neighborhood when she and a small group of parishioners from St. Boniface Catholic Church first traveled to Haiti in 1983. It was supposed to be a one-time deal, her single chance to do missionary work. She knew hardly anything about the country.

Now, Canniff says she feels just as comfortable in Haiti's back country as she does on the South Shore. She rumbles over the dirt roads there in a well-travelled SUV, kicking up a storm of dust. She reaches her arm out the window, waves and calls out "bon soir" to the occasional person walking by.

At the hospital she helped

build, she bends over a malnourished infant and elicits a smile and gurgle, then chats easily with the baby's mother. She learned Creole long ago.

"We can learn so much from the Haitian people, from the great faith they have in spite of the odds against them day after day," Canniff said. "They have this tremendous spirit, this hope. They're always hoping that tomorrow is going to be a better day than yesterday. They patiently wait for that to happen."

Canniff has been in Haiti through three coups. Armed militiamen ordered her out of a bus and forced her to show her passport and other travel documents. She once found herself covered in mud when the donkey she was riding waded into a river. She has slept in primitive buildings infested with rats. She has gotten violently sick from dengue fever.

All this from a woman who didn't like family camping trips because she couldn't stand the bugs.

But ask Canniff if she has ever had a bad experience in Haiti and she matter-of-factly says no. It's impossible to view such inconveniences as

hardships after seeing the way most Haitians live, she explained.

"Almost every fear I have ever had has been removed since I started going to Haiti," she said.

Fred Canniff, a retired painter, has been to Haiti twice. The first time, in 1987, he went with the U.S. State Department to serve as an observer in an election in which Haitians were supposed to choose a democratic government. Instead, voters who lined up at polls in Port-au-Prince were massacred — 20 were killed at one polling station — and a military dictatorship was declared.

Despite such violent flare-ups, political instability and State Department warnings that "there are no safe areas in Haiti," Canniff said he doesn't worry about his wife when she travels.

"It may seem trite, but the Lord takes the fear out of your heart. It's hard to explain," he said.

Andy Canniff was 8 when Nannette Canniff started going to Haiti. At the time, he thought of it as her job. "It was what she did. She just didn't get paid for it," he said.

THIS SERIES: **DAY BY DAY**

Through 20 years of effort, a South Shore church group has touched the lives of a desperately poor people in Haiti. This is the story of that mission and how it has persevered and expanded. A Patriot Ledger reporter and photographer went to Haiti to tell the story of the group's remarkable achievement.

SATURDAY:
Basic medical care is saving lives

TODAY:
New homes become the foundation for a better day

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WEDNESDAY:
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