

A daily struggle to **SURVIVE**

■ HAITI

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temperature are recorded. Then the men, women and children are fed a hot meal before being sent on their way with heavy bags filled with enough rice, beans, cooking oil and other food to feed an entire family for two weeks.

In Fond des Blancs, hunger is a constant companion. Many people eke out a living as farmers; when there is no rain, there is no food.

Parents with as many as 10 children are often able to scrape together only one meal a day. Even then, it may be just a small helping of rice and beans. Water comes from wells as far as two miles away, carried in five-gallon buckets that women balance on their heads or in jugs dragged by small children.

The St. Boniface Haiti Foundation cannot feed all 45,000 people who live in the Fond des Blancs region. But the organization and its volunteers are trying to help the most vulnerable.

In a typical week, 65 families are fed through the children's nutrition clinic. In addition, food is delivered once a month to 200 senior citizens who cannot make the long trek to the hospital and who are unable to provide for themselves.

Residents with tuberculosis are also helped.

"It's incomprehensible to simply have nothing, and that is not an uncommon experience," said the Rev. Gerald Osterman, who began traveling to Haiti 20 years ago when he was assigned to St. Boniface Catholic Church in Quincy's Germantown neighborhood and who has returned dozens of times since.

As an 8-year-old SUV maneuvers a dirt road, Father Jerry, as he's called, points to a well off to the side. A group of children push a heavy metal lever up and down, pumping water from the ground.

When he first came to Fond des Blancs, there were only three wells. People would walk an entire day just to retrieve a bucket of water. Others drank from nearby rivers that double as bath tubs and laundromats and are breeding grounds for diseases,

such as typhoid fever.

Through the years, the St. Boniface Haiti Foundation helped recruit international relief organizations to dig new wells. Today, there are about 40. When pumps break, the St. Boniface Haiti Foundation pays to fix them.

Nannette Canniff is a 66-year-old Randolph resident who runs the St. Boniface Haiti Foundation and spends weeks at a time in Fond des Blancs.

On this day, she stands in the hospital and watches as a nurse puts a baby in a sling and hangs him from a scale, almost as if weighing fruit in a supermarket. The boy waves his arms and legs wildly, reaches for his mother and yelps in fear.

The nutrition clinic is not just about feeding these children, Canniff said. It is also about teaching their parents.

"Some of the new mothers have not had any education and their mothers did not have any education," Canniff said. "In some cases, it's so bad that if a mother died or can't breast feed, they'll feed a baby coffee or tea, not knowing it's not good."

One person at a time, the foundation is making a difference.

Denorvil, the woman who walked six hours to get to the clinic, said her son weighed less than 7 pounds when he was 5 months old. Nine months later, he weighs nearly 17 pounds.

Dressed in denim shorts and a rainbow-colored hat, he hardly looks like a boy who was starving just a few months before. He slaps his hand against his mouth, making funny noises as his mother talks.

Across the room, Gerda Denous holds her 3-year-old son, Getride. Denous walks 90 minutes from her house to the nutrition clinic every other week.

The reason is simple: "All the food they give is good food and the kids can eat it," she said in Creole.

"Without this food, I don't know if I would find it. You need money to buy it and I don't have money."

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■ A terrified baby is weighed as part of the nutrition program at St. Boniface Hospital before going through a series of medical tests. Malnutrition is a severe problem throughout Haiti. The hospital helps by providing food.

Haitian burn victim gets aid – and a new family

RANDOLPH –

Ernst Sajous' step-mother kept nagging him, annoyed that the family's refrigerator, powered by kerosene, wasn't getting cold.

For maybe the sixth time that day, the 13-year-old went to re-ignite the pilot light.

He was warning his brothers and sisters to stand back when the flames burst onto his chest.

"Smoke starts coming out of my mouth. I feel my heart hurting me," he now recalls.

Doctors said he'd be dead in an hour.

Four months passed and Sajous was still alive, lying in a hospital in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, exposed tissue oozing fluids in places his skin used to cover. Bandages stick to his wounds.

A woman approaches and asks a simple question: "Ernst, how are you doing today?"

"I'm suffering with Jesus on the cross," he tells her.

Three days later, Sajous is on a plane, his limbs and chest wrapped in bandages. He is heading to a country he doesn't know with a woman he just met, not sure if he'll survive.

Sajous is 27 now and looks out on a different world.

He opens the screen door to a Pond Lane house in Randolph, leans down and



■ Ernst Sajous, center, was brought to Randolph from Haiti by Fred and Nannette Canniff for medical treatment in 1990. He remained with them during and after several surgeries for severe burns, and is now a construction worker on the South Shore.

kisses the woman he met 13 years ago in that Port-au-Prince hospital. Today, he calls her mom.

Nannette Canniff smiles and kisses him back.

"I prayed every day when I was in the hospital and God

answered my prayers," Sajous says. "God sent mom to help out."

Canniff is the executive director of the St. Boniface Haiti Foundation.

It took 22 surgeries and more than a decade for doctors

at Shriners Hospital in Boston to reconstruct Sajous' skin. Without the operations, he likely would not have been able to move his arms.

Through it all, he has lived with Canniff, her husband, Fred, and whichever of their 10

children happen to be staying at home. He went to Randolph High School, playing soccer between surgeries, and graduated in 1994.

"Never for one moment did I feel uncomfortable," he says on a recent evening as he sits in the Canniffs' living room. "I take them as my mother and father and sisters and brothers. It was the same love that any family could have given me. It was nothing different."

Sajous has built a life here. He and his girlfriend have a 4-year-old daughter, Erncia, who started kindergarten last week. Mother and daughter live in Brockton.

Sajous awakens at 6 most mornings and spends long days working in construction, laying ceramic bathroom tiles, replacing drop ceilings, repairing basements damaged by floods.

He has permanent residency and plans to stay in America. He wants to become a citizen.

Still, Sajous says he thinks about Haiti every day.

He remembers every detail of those days in the Port-au-Prince hospital: kneeling in a steel tub as his birth mother pours a pitcher filled with water and alcohol over his open wounds.

"I'm suffering and she is telling me, 'Just hold there,

everything's going to be all right.' She's removing the bandage. She's trying to hold me so I don't cry. She's being very caring when removing the bandage from me. When any other people touch me, I would scream, 'No, no, no.'"

The nurses had many other patients and often would rush taking the bandages on and off, he said, making the process painful. But his mother would spend the whole day working on him.

He has seen his mother twice in 13 years.

While he was gone, sometime in the '90s, men broke into his mother's home and beat her, saying the family supported Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the president then in exile. They dragged his uncle away and shoved him into a car. The uncle has not been seen since.

Sajous sends his mother money now and helped move her to a new house in Port-au-Prince. He'd like to bring her here one day, have his two mothers close, his two worlds together.

"Home for me is both places," he says.

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PERSONAL **JOURNAL**

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Yves Florant Jacques disappears into the mud hut he shares with his family to retrieve a tiny piece of notebook paper that has somehow stayed white and crisp despite the rain that seeps into his home.

A Colorado phone number and Hotmail E-mail address are written in neat blue letters under the name Corey.

Jacques, 16, says it is the name of the American who taught him English at the local school. Jacques has no phone or computer, but he is careful not to lose that piece of paper; he might make it to America one day, he says.

He tells you to copy Corey's information, to get in touch with him, let him know he's missed.

He'll remember me, the boy explains. "I was very cute."

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You drive less than an hour, and the harsh brown soil and rocky hills of Fond des Blancs give way to paradise. The Caribbean's blue-green waves crash against a sandy beach. Palm trees dance in the breeze.

If this were any other island, you think, throngs of tourists would be soaking up the sun, but this is Haiti, so the beach is all your own.

Children start to appear from behind large bushes and creep closer. Five are standing in front of you now, just staring. They inch forward, eyes wide, giggling, until they're almost in your lap.

Nannette Canniff, a Randolph resident who wishes more Americans could see this pristine beauty, nudges the kids back. They take a step away, but a minute later they've inched forward again.

One girl picks up a shell and reaches out her hand. "Cadeau," she says to Canniff. Gift.

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On the road outside the hospital, a boy runs in circles with a tattered plastic bag tied to a string. It is a makeshift kite. It flaps a little, then falls to the ground. He starts running again, and the scene plays out a second time.

Another boy pushes around a "truck" made from a plastic juice bottle with bottle caps for wheels.

Children here learn to make something out of nothing.

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Conor Shapiro is 22 and from Concord. He graduated from Middlebury College in Vermont in May and plans to spend a year here teaching English. He's living in a church rectory.

Shapiro is a soccer nut and is standing on the sidelines at a game. He says later that boys and girls make soccer balls from anything that can be stuck together.

He has a surprise: a duffel bag stuffed with brand new soccer balls and jerseys that he'll hand out once school begins. He can't wait to see the smiles.

"I love it here," he says. "I enjoy the people. They are as warm and genuine as they come. There's such a sense of community."

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Kathy Comito is sitting in an apartment above St. Boniface Hospital and thinking out loud.

She's been in Haiti since June and will stay on as hospital administrator at least three years.

She tells you about an article in People magazine on a new reality show where contestants compete for a \$2 million wedding.

Two million dollars could change the world here, she says, annoyed that reality TV seems disconnected from reality.

"One of the things we forget, being Americans, is that 10 percent of the world lives like we do," she says. "Ninety percent of the world lives like this. Our expectation is that there is this little pocket of poor people, whether it's in Haiti or Ecuador, who live like this, but this is reality for most of the world."

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

YESTERDAY: New homes become the foundation for a better day

TODAY: The everyday struggle for food and water is eased

TOMORROW: Education and jobs provide hope for the future