

HELPING IN
HAITI
A Story of Hope,
Charity and Faith

A nation of **CONTRAST**



■ A scrapped automobile sits on the streets of Port-au-Prince as a Mercedes Benz passes a pedestrian.



■ Villagers dressed in their best outfits gather outside St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church in Fond des Blancs, Haiti, after a 6 a.m. weekday Mass. It is an area of rugged mountainous terrain.

Political instability chases away hopes of achieving better life

Through dictators, military rulers and a fledgling democracy, little has changed in Haiti: the people remain prisoners of poverty, political instability and violence.

"The political class in Haiti has failed miserably the Haitian people," said U.S. Rep. William Delahunt, D-Quincy, who has traveled to Haiti about 10 times. "To see the failure of their political leadership — I'm not singling out anyone particularly, it is the entire political class that has failed."

Haiti, a country roughly a third larger than Massachusetts, wasn't always punished by poverty.

In the 18th century, the Caribbean nation was a lucrative possession for the French, who shipped slaves there from Africa and developed a burgeoning sugar industry.

The slaves revolted and in 1804 formed the world's first black republic. While the nation has survived, political stability has always been elusive.



MICHAEL BERTRAND/The Patriot Ledger

The country's recent history has been marred by violence and repression. François "Papa Doc" Duvalier became president in 1957 and soon after proclaimed himself president for life. His secret police, called Tonton Macoutes, used murder and intimidation to quell resistance.

When Duvalier died in 1971, his 19-year-old son, Jean-Claude Duvalier, inherited the presidency. "Baby Doc" reigned until 1986, when he fled amid a popular uprising by poor and

hungry Haitians.

Gen. Henri Namphy assumed leadership, and the groundwork was laid for the 1990 democratic elections that saw Jean-Bertrand Aristide installed as president.

In September 1991, seven months after he took office, Aristide was ousted in a coup orchestrated by the army and backers of the Duvalier dynasty. The new rulers terrorized the country and killed supporters of Aristide, who had been exiled after the coup.

U.S. forces restored Aristide to power in 1994. Barred from seeking a second consecutive term under the Haitian constitution, Aristide helped ally René Préval win election in 1995.

Aristide was elected to a second five-year term in 2000, but legislative elections held the same year were widely criticized as tainted because of the way votes were tallied. As a result, the United States has blocked the release of \$500 million in international aid, causing further economic collapse.

Tension and violent clashes between Aristide and the opposition party continue. Aristide, a former priest who brazenly preached against the Duvaliers while serving in Port-au-Prince slums, remains popular among the nation's poor. His relationship with the U.S. government has soured, however, with the United States blaming him for failing to condemn violent protests and protect the safety of opposition party members. In a country with no

natural resources and virtually no industry, the ongoing political instability has chased away hope of building an economy that can pull people out of poverty.

Delahunt said he believes the country can still make strides to dig itself out and said the "Haitian diaspora" — Haitians living outside the country, including those in the United States — should play a role.

"You have to resolve the political impasse," he said. "You need a whole new wave of political leaders, in my judgment. This is so cultural, and it's so embedded. These are people who have been beaten for so long, for all 200 years of their independence."

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■ Gegis Peterson, 9, is in charge of the animals and taking care of himself and his diabetic father, who has been hospitalized several times at St Boniface Hospital.

FACES OF **HAITI**

Nine-year-old Gegis Peterson kneels on the floor of St. Boniface Hospital, reaches into a pail and splashes water on his father's feet.

His father, Bismen LaFontaine, has diabetes. More than a week before, father and son walked two hours and 45 minutes from their home to the hospital. It was their second visit in two months. The last time, LaFontaine was released but couldn't afford the insulin he needs to stay healthy.

Gegis knows his dad is sick, and he's scared. He has already lost his mother, and he has no other relatives nearby.

"I'm worried about my father," he said quietly in Creole as he sat on a bench outside the hospital.

At home, Gegis does what he can to help out. A tiny boy with wide eyes and hair cropped close to his head, he explains that he cleans the house, tends to farm animals and walks goats around. He pauses for a moment, and a hint of pride creeps into his voice when he says that he also kills the goats for food and cooks dinner.

For all his responsibility, Gegis is still very much a child. Tucked under his arm is a small notepad he shows to just about anyone willing to look. Inside, on lined, white pages are colorful pictures of trucks that could have been drawn by a 9-year-old anywhere in the world.

On another page, is a simple sketch: Gegis and his father, smiling, in front of their house.

HERE AND **THERE**



■ The Gelmy family of Fond des Blancs has received three goats from the St. Boniface Haiti Foundation.

Numbers that count **FOOD & NUTRITION**

	Haiti	United States
Population with access to improved drinking water sources	45%	100%
Children under 5 with stunted growth	47%	2%
Babies breastfed at birth	36%	67%
Severely underweight children under 5	17%	1%
Minimum daily required calories consumed	89%	138%
Meat production per capita	25.1 lbs	290 lbs.
Meat consumption per capita	22.7 lbs	268.4 lbs
Per capita calorie supply per day	1,977.5	3,754

Sources: UNICEF; UN Statistics Division; Material World Statistics; Agriculture Fact Book, Population Reference Bureau; Mothering Magazine; World Resources Institute

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HOW TO **HELP**

For more information on the St. Boniface Haiti Foundation visit www.haitihealth.org.

Donations may be made online or mailed to St. Boniface Haiti Foundation, 14 Pond Lane, Randolph 02368.

People interested in making nonmonetary contributions of medicine or other supplies, or who want to learn more about the foundation's work retreats to Haiti, should call 781-961-6927.

ON THE **WEB**

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LINKS TO THE **SOUTH SHORE**

Kathleen Perkins speaks little Creole. "I can ask what hurts, say, 'Bite down' and, 'Spit,'" the 29-year-old Milton dentist said.

When she was working in Fond des Blancs, however, Perkins had no problem understanding what many of her patients wanted: to smile proudly.

"You could make some of them so happy," Perkins

said. "They'd have black decay on their front teeth. To fix that up for them, they would be so happy."

Perkins traveled to Fond des Blancs in June with the St. Boniface Haiti Foundation. She had been to Haiti twice before, both times to the city of Jeremie on the country's southwest tip.

On those previous trips, Perkins said, she spent most of her time pulling teeth. In Fond des Blancs,

she did that, too, but also worked with the St. Boniface Hospital's full-time Haitian dentist doing fillings and root canals. "You feel like you're helping before you get to extractions," she said.

Some of her patients had teeth rotted nearly all the way through, possibly from years of sucking on sugar cane when they had no food to eat.

None complained. "Their tolerance for pain

seems to be relative to what they deal with in their lives," Perkins said. "Yet, still there's pride. They want their teeth to look nice."



■ Dr. Kathleen Perkins of Milton.