

Hope rises for Haiti schools

STUDENTS ANXIOUS AS STATE GROUP WORKS ON REBUILDING

By [AMY SCHLESING](#)

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Photo by [Benjamin Krain](#)

School principal Jean Manesse, left, and priest Pere Desire Fritz, talk with their students at a high school in Sheridan, Haiti about the building collapsing in an earthquake which devastated the country 2 months ago. The school was the first of 44 build in rural Haiti by the Haitian Education Foundation which is based in El Dorado.

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CHERIDENT, Haiti — The ruins of Frances Landers' dream of schools for all Haitian children lie cracked and broken in the mountains southwest of Port-au-Prince, Haiti's capital, but hope for rebuilding is growing stronger every day.

Landers, an El Dorado native, created the Haiti Education Foundation, which during the past three decades built 44 schools across Haiti's impoverished southern peninsula - epicenter of the nation's Jan. 12 earthquake.

The quake tore the heart out of this mountainous finger of land - the churches and schools that had become the center of small communities.

Remy Moise sat under a tarp next to the remains of St. Mathias primary school in Cherident with the rest of her classmates this week as they waited to hear whether they would be able to take their final graduation exams. There is no word on when the exams will be held.

Remy went to school in the buildings that lay wrecked around her and hopes to go to college next year. When the time comes, it's likely she and her classmates will take their exams crammed onto benches and sharing desks under this same tarp.

"The school is our future," she said. "And now it is gone."

The Haiti Department of Education intends to start school again April 1. With most of the schools damaged, however, the plan is little more than a pipe dream.

"Money built the school," said Fritz Desire, the Episcopal priest in charge of St. Mathias parish and school. "And money will rebuild the school."

The Haiti Education Foundation has raised more than \$150,000 in the past two months to rebuild its schools and their Episcopal Church parishes.

Chris McRae, a member of the Haiti Education Foundation board of directors and team leader with Living Waters of the World, arrived in Haiti on Wednesday and hit the ground running.

His aim was to install a new water-purification system in a Port-au-Prince neighborhood with Living Waters and look for a way to rebuild the foundation's schools.

"Primarily we want to clean up some of the schools so we have space to replace them," he said, flipping through a notebook of plans for fabricated steel buildings. "It could still take a long time."

Nothing is easy in Haiti.

Imported supplies are notoriously held up by Haitian customs agents awaiting payment of a large import tax bill that many times is 50 percent of the value of the goods being ferried in. None of the schools funded by the Haiti Education Foundation are easy to get to.

This is farming land, where donkeys outnumber vehicles as modes of travel and the steep mountains still bear the scars of their French plantation past 200 years ago - clear-cut and terraced mountainsides that once were covered with sugar cane.

Haitians still farm these terraces, but on a much smaller scale. They turn dirt by hand with hoes and have every family member in the field at harvest time. The land produces barely enough beans, corn, sugar cane, sweet potatoes and grapefruit to feed the sparse population.

The road from Leogane climbs tortuously, filled with boulders and deep culverts as it twists and turns out of the city.

Even before the earthquake the route was more of a donkey trail than a road.

The quake seized the road upward in several places, leaving foot-long fissures several feet deep. Residents carefully maneuver their cars and donkeys over these cracks and continue on their way.

The Episcopal priests from several schools met with McRae on Thursday to work on a rebuilding plan. They were leery at first about his plan for steel buildings. They looked too flimsy to withstand the hurricanes and earthquakes that plague the island.

"I want all of you to sign off on the plan first," he told the men. "Because if you don't like this plan, we won't do it. You are our partners, these are your schools and churches."

McRae explained the steel construction and how the buildings can be ordered in various sizes for much less than the cost of new concrete construction. A 3,000-square-foot steel building costs about \$15,000.

"How long will they last?" asked Desire.

"These are very strong. They are steel. They'll last 50 to 100 years," McRae said.

The priest stared at him in silence.

One of the priests said it may work for another village, but not his.

"It would be good for Trouin," said Fruitho Michud, the priest in charge of St. Marc Episcopal Church and the school there.

His declaration changed the attitudes of the others and the priests agreed to try one building. When McRae said he intended to deliver steel buildings to replace the churches as well, even the most skeptical priests were sold.

"We will start at Cherident," McRae said. "I need to know how many schoolrooms I need to build."

"Plus the church," Desire said. "Very important."

McRae is taking the proposal to the foundation board when he returns home for final approval. Then he will work out the shipping details through the Episcopal diocese in Port-au-Prince and prepare a team to train the Haitians in constructing the buildings.

In the meantime, McRae took a bill for parts and repairs needed for the bulldozer and dump truck the churches share and promised to send money. The equipment will be essential for the cleanup at all the schools, and sturdy enough to navigate the dirt roads that link them.

The town of Trouin fills a narrow valley, its houses lining the dirt road that drops into town as quickly as it climbs back out.

St. Marc Episcopal Church is mostly rubble. Chairs and pews poke out of the debris, and bricks are stewn about. Next door, one of Landers' schools still stands, but its walls are cracked with large gaps all the way to the second floor.

"Everything we had is under there," Michud said as he walked through the remains. "The building is destroyed, but we have the people. We organize for Mass outside now. We will do that for school, too."

He walked around the rubble in his clerical collar, a cross around his neck, and talked about his hope to rebuild.

Four people died in his church Jan. 12. Four others were badly injured with broken legs. The rubble claimed one woman's leg.

In the school, grammar exam questions linger in white chalk on a blue board on the wall.

The school cannot be used again. It is not safe.

It had 400 students, from kindergarten to high school. In the mountain villages, children travel from miles away to attend. With the recent influx of refugees from Port-au-Prince, the town needs a school and church more than ever.

Like the refugees, Michud lives in a tent. His parsonage is on the verge of collapse with its front wall leaning out toward the street.

"The kids love school," Michud said.

"That's the future for the Haitian people. That's the only way the Haitian people can make something of themselves. We need tents, benches, chairs and chalk to write with."

Down the street, a tarp tethered to a couple of palm trees and a building provided shade for Mass. Two local nurses set up an aid station there, and neighborhood children loitered in the shade, whiling away the day.

"I miss what I used to learn," said Young Bernard, a third-grader in St. Marc Parish School.

Michud was born in Cherident, a hard one-hour drive farther into the mountains.

"The priest there encouraged me to continue my education and become an Episcopal priest. It made me what I am today," he said.

Like Trouin, the damage at Cherident is vast. Very little stands.

St. Mathias Episcopal Church, the numerous school buildings, the rectory and guesthouse are all gone. The high school's two stories collapsed in on themselves like a stack of pancakes.

No one died, but the students remain scared of their own homes. Nightmares still contain images of collapsing buildings and bricks falling like rain.

St. Mathias was the Haiti Education Foundation's first school and was considered its flagship school. It had grown into a boarding and college preparatory school with 600 students that drew students from miles around as it had some of the best test scores in the nation, according to the Haiti Department of Education.

Manesse Jean, the high school principal at St. Mathias, toiled on paperwork while walking around the wreckage. Will it be rebuilt? "I think so," he said. "We wait and we hope."

The foundation continues to pay the teachers and principals, giving them hope that money and equipment are on the way to rebuild.

The idea for the Haiti Education Foundation was born in 1981 when Frances Landers and her husband, Dr. Gardner Landers, were in Haiti on one of their many medical missionary trips. Frances heard an Episcopal priest at Sainte Croix Hospital in Leogane tell a child that there was not room in the school for the child. She decided that day to focus her efforts on building more schools so no child would be denied a chance to learn.

Every year, the schools graduate more and more students.

"I'm going to do my best," said Julien Yades said of his final exam.

"I want to go to university, do something that would help my country."

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