

## Actionnel

It was the longest dinner we had in Bayonnais. Actionnel normally ate with us, enlightening us with words of wisdom and advice regarding the events of the day, or enlivening the conversation with his light-hearted sense of humor. This evening was different. As we quietly ate the generous helpings of food that the locals cooked for us, Actionnel sat on the front porch of the guesthouse. This was our home for two weeks, right next to the church, unquestionably the most comfortable place to stay in all of Bayonnais. It was also the center of social activity in Bayonnais.

Every Sunday dozens of Haitians put on their best clothes and descended the surrounding mountain slopes to gather for an hour and hear Actionnel speak. Every morning school children congregated in the open space, laughing, kicking a soccer ball, or throwing rocks to knock down breakfast out of the giant mango tree. Every evening, men gathered for lively and raucous games of dominoes.

If anything was happening in the community, this was the place, which is why Actionnel was sitting on the front porch. Something happened in Bayonnais today, something very out of the ordinary, and something completely unacceptable to Actionnel. A pair of shoes was stolen.

As we sat eating our dinner, we quietly wondered what he was saying. Dozens of teenagers sat on the steps, solemnly listening to him speak. We only knew how articulate and poetic he was when he spoke to us in English, his third language. Listening to the almost musical yet completely authoritative tone of his Kreyòl, we knew that whatever it was he was saying was certainly being taken seriously by his captive audience. Finally after several hours of talking, Actionnel came into the kitchen with the missing pair of shoes. Laughter could be heard outside. The sermon was over, and everything was back to normal.

Haiti is a country known for its political unrest, urban violence, extreme poverty, and complete lack of infrastructure. This means only the most adventurous travelers go to Haiti. While I like to consider myself and my fellow travelers in the category of extreme adventurers, I have to say that I

have never felt safer and more welcome anywhere than I did in Bayonnais.

Bayonnais is a mountain valley of almost 100,000 people. Staying in the very center of the community in the church guesthouse, it is hard to get a true sense of the population. The density is relatively low, each family possessing a small dwelling and a small plot of land with which to raise meager amounts of food. It wasn't until we spent several hours hiking into the surrounding mountains that I realized how far the children had to walk each day to go to school, and how far each family walked to go to church every Sunday.

Haiti is often considered the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. It has suffered extreme environmental degradation, and has endured centuries of political corruption and unrest. Bayonnais certainly is not immune to these problems. There are almost no jobs in Bayonnais, and the lack of cooking fuel has caused a continuous cycle of deforestation and degradation. With all these problems, how could we feel so safe and welcomed, in such a troubled environment?

In 1984, a group of mission workers from North Carolina visited Bayonnais. One member of the group, a school teacher, noticed a young man that she thought looked extremely motivated and determined. In a decision that would impact the entire community for generations to come, this woman generously committed to sponsoring the education of this young man, named Actionnel Fleurisma.

Actionnel finished his secondary studies in Haiti, and was given the opportunity to study in North Carolina for two years. Upon returning to Haiti after his studies in the United States, Actionnel founded a school in Bayonnais. He also continued his studies and became an ordained minister, continuing the work started by his sponsors in North Carolina. As the school grew larger and larger, a new church was founded as well. After sixteen years, the school now enrolls close to 2000 students. Many graduates of the school, which includes primary and secondary education, continue their studies at colleges outside of Bayonnais. Through the counseling and guidance of Actionnel, students choose careers that will someday benefit the entire community. Several students are currently studying medicine, with the hopes of improving the health conditions in the community. Others are studying

agriculture, forestry, engineering, and journalism.

Actionnel is not only the educational and spiritual leader of the community; he is also the governor, mayor, judge, and police. There may be an official local government in place, but if anything happens in the community, it happens because of Actionnel. This is why I was fortunate enough to travel to Bayonnais in June, 2009.

Acting as the official general contractor of Bayonnais, Actionnel has been working with the University of Wisconsin, Madison chapter of Engineers Without Borders since 2002. In this time, along with the EWB San Francisco chapter, a bridge has been constructed capable of handling all vehicle traffic into the community. A photovoltaic power system has also been installed to provide power for the church and school. The UW Madison chapter is currently working to design and build a hydroelectric power system that will provide power for a future health clinic in the community.

It was a great opportunity for me to work with the members of Bayonnais on this project. I was greatly impressed with the outlook of the people. Even though they had so little, they remained very positive about their lives. I was continually amazed at Actionnel's ability to keep the entire community running in an efficient manner. I couldn't help but wonder what Haiti would be like if Actionnel ran the whole country, instead of just the community of Bayonnais.

The EWB trip in June lasted for two weeks. A follow-up trip was then scheduled for January, 2010. Several students from the Madison chapter went on this trip. It was during this trip that the devastating earthquake occurred. Thankfully everyone was safe in Bayonnais, the epicenter of the earthquake occurred 70 miles south, in Port-Au-Prince. Nobody in Bayonnais was injured, but the community was greatly impacted socially by the disaster. Most people in Bayonnais have family and friends in Port-Au-Prince, and many of Bayonnais' students study at the universities of Port-Au-Prince.

This earthquake was the most deadly natural disaster ever to hit the Western Hemisphere. In addition to the hundreds of thousands of people who were killed, over a million people were left homeless. As these people try to rebuild their lives, many of them are leaving Port-Au-Prince and

returning to the countryside. Some have relatives they can rely on, but many are moving to an unknown area, and an unknown lifestyle. Many of them are moving to Bayonnais.

300 refugees have been brought to Bayonnais, and many more will be coming. Many of them have spent their entire lives in a completely urban environment and have no knowledge or skills to help them survive in rural Haiti. The people of Bayonnais do not have much food, and they struggle constantly to keep themselves and their families fed. While it would seem hard to bring in this many people into a community that already struggles to sustain itself, the thought of turning them away never occurred to Actionnel or the people of Bayonnais.

The disaster was deadly, and Haiti will never be the same again. Port-Au-Prince may never be completely rebuilt. No one knows what sort of government will emerge, or what the future holds for the country. There is one thing I am certain of: Bayonnais will continue to remain positive and uplifted. Thanks largely in part to the school and church built by Actionnel, the community has become one full of optimism. It will certainly be a hard adjustment for both the community and the refugees that are now members of the community, but Actionnel will use it as an opportunity.

If there is any silver lining to the disaster, this is it. More people will have the opportunity to live in a safe community and send their children to one of the best schools in Haiti. The work that Actionnel started over 20 years ago will continue. It will be continued by Actionnel, and then by the children of the community, and perhaps by Bayonnais' newest members. If these refugees ever leave Bayonnais in the future, perhaps they will return to their old lives with a new-found motivation to improve their communities the way Actionnel did. The progress of Bayonnais could be exported throughout Haiti. This could be Actionnel's greatest legacy.