

## David Casey: Volunteer Report – Duchity, Haiti – June, 2014

What is life like for a typical young person born in Duchity, Haiti? To start with, his/her house is a one room, cinderblock box with a rusted, corrugated metal roof. Because it lacks electricity, it is sweltering without air-conditioning, dark after sunset, while the absence of a computer, television, radio, refrigerator, and other common appliances renders it technologically silent. A shower is a five gallon bucket of water lugged (head-balanced) 100 – 200 yards; the toilet is a hole outside. If there's a bed, it's crowded. Nonperishable food (the only option) is cooked on a welded-steel, charcoal grill or in a rock-lined fire pit fueled by scavenged wood.

This youth's prospects are slim: no healthcare, no government-funded education. The local Catholic school is too expensive for most. The private "National" school charges \$80 a year, in a country with an average annual *rural* per capita income of \$100. The "Free" school isn't, and its staff is underpaid, undereducated, and its curriculum highly erratic. Future employment opportunities are equally limited. Males might apprentice in concrete masonry, herd a few goats or sheep, drive a motorbike taxi, or farm root vegetables or seasonal fruits (plantains, papayas, etc.). Females get to run a market stand (a blanket on the ground, Mondays/Thursdays), cook on a street corner, or wash laundry. Most preachers, teachers, policemen, and paid local officials appear to be men.

The past five Junes, my volunteer work in Haiti has made me recognize the incredible life of affluence and privilege I was just plain lucky enough to be born into. Upon returning home, the simple acts of flipping a light switch, running a faucet, or opening the "frig," fill me with appreciation, and yes, more than a little guilt. Phil Ochs's great song "There But for Fortune" plays in my head, a constant reminder of how the youth described above could easily have been me. The physical labor I perform (16 straight days this year), the money I raise (\$6,706), the goodwill of others I represent, all stems from the underlying belief that the community I'm helping somehow includes a version of me and each person I know and care about. I go to Haiti to help others but end up helping *me/us*.

### What the *Power of Us* Accomplished

59 people contributed \$6,706 to continue building the vocational school in Duchity.  
8 local masonry workers were paid \$140 (daily total) for 16 days of work. (\$2,236)  
School Exterior concrete finish (walls, columns, door/window trim: 3/5 of building done)  
Four interior classroom floors (concrete) completed  
111 bags of Haitian-made cement, locally purchased (\$886)  
4 truckloads of river bottom sand, locally sourced and delivered (\$634)  
8 custom-welded, steel security doors fabricated and installed  
9 custom-welded, steel security windows fabricated and installed  
Welding labor (local) for doors/windows (4 or 5 workers, 10 days: \$744)  
Door/Window Materials, locally purchased (\$1,614)  
5 *Biosand* drinking-water filters to benefit masonry worker families (\$250, Haitian-made)  
Miscellaneous building/plumbing materials, locally purchased (\$109)  
Site Truck Repair, used front axle/linchpin/bearings (\$384)  
115 toothbrushes distributed to local children (donated) - more on back, please -



A Day in the Life of Dave "Travay"

6:00 AM: Wake and read *A People's History of the United States* (Howard Zinn)  
6:30 AM: Dress (water bottle, back-brace, work gloves, hat, bandana, repellent, & sunscreen)  
7:00 AM: Haul 15-25 five gallon water buckets, 60 yards from cistern to work site barrel  
7:30 AM: Sift river bottom sand with hand-held sift box, three grades: coarse, seed, fine  
10:00 AM: Breakfast (Typical: Cabbage soup with yams, plantains, potatoes, and carrots)  
10:30 AM: Sift more sand (Rotate the role of sifter and shovel man; sifter less desirable)  
12:00 PM: Wheel-barrow coarse, sifted sand to storage room (1,500 lbs.)  
12:30 PM: Haul 5-15 five gallon water buckets to replenish site water barrel supply  
1:00 PM: Sift coarse sand with fine-sand sift box (600 lbs. of fine sand)  
4:00 PM: Bag fine-sand using recycled cement bags  
4:30 PM: Sift gravel to separate "seed" gravel from "pea" gravel (600 lbs., bagged)  
6:00 PM: Shower with half a five gallon bucket of cistern water  
6:30 PM: Dinner (Typical: Rice and Beans topped with vegetable and beef stew, avocado)  
7:00 PM: Read *My Antonia* (Willa Cather)  
7:30 PM: Drink one *Prestige* (Haitian beer) with fellow workers, chat, observe evening's fall  
8:30 PM: Sleep in dorm room (\*Travay, *work* in Creole, has become my Haitian last name.)

This routine was repeated daily with variations that included shoveling/hauling mixed concrete, constructing/deconstructing/reconstructing scaffolding, removing nails from scaffolding, and straightening used nails for reuse. Sixteen days of manual labor felt like thirty. I'm not complaining; physical toil is meditative and its daily exhaustion an earned reward. As I worked, I was surrounded by the boisterous camaraderie of men grateful for a job. The Creole I studied all year, prior to my trip, allowed me limited access to that bonhomie with all the cautious fluency of a tongue-tied three year old, but speak I did.

I spoke about the caring group of contributors I represent, a group that converts my commitment (and the \$107 value of my physical labor) into the materials we use and the pay they receive. I spoke about a completed vocational school: the future source of viable trades (carpentry, welding, motor repair) for their children. I emphasized how the biosand water filters they earned through their labor would provide their families and neighbors with safe drinking water for years to come. But mainly, I communicated my belief that the chief responsibility of the "fortunate by birth" is to use that advantage to better the lives of those born in places where a life's aspirations are stymied by untenable circumstances. I assured them that their struggle is my struggle and that my commitment to that struggle is indefatigable and fueled by the power of a community of friends and family who recognize a shared humanity and express it with the *Power of Us*. I told them I would be back next year because part of me, the best part, lives in Haiti too.

Working for a better world,



Dave "Travay"

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