

# *From Hollywood to Haiti*

by

*Gerard Thomas Straub*

I used to drive down Sunset Boulevard in Beverly Hills on a regular basis. Now I drive down Poverty Road, down a bumpy dirt road in Haiti. I once worked with major stars—Elizabeth Taylor, Tony Randal, Alec Baldwin, and Demi Moore, to name a few. Now I work with an uneducated staff caring for abandoned kids from the most dangerous, violent slum in all of Haiti. After being an executive at CBS in New York City, I produced soap operas on NBC, CBS, and ABC, including the wildly popular *General Hospital* back in the “Luke & Laura” on the run days, I left Hollywood and my television career to devote myself to writing a book on St. Francis of Assisi in order to understand the saint’s love not only for the poor but for poverty also...which made no sense to me. The book, *The Sun & Moon Over Assisi*, won a number of awards and set me on a new, unexpected path. Besides writing seven additional published books, I made two dozen documentary films on global poverty, filming in India, Kenya, Uganda, Jamaica, Haiti, Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador, Peru, Brazil, and the Philippines. I also filmed the homeless in Los Angeles, Detroit, and Philadelphia, as well as in Budapest, Hungary. The films raised funds for the people and organizations featured in them, people who lived a self-emptying love, giving themselves to people suffering in the cruel prisons of extreme poverty. Martin Sheen narrated one film. Bono contributed a song to another films. Hollywood professionals worked on the films. My nonprofit corporation’s motto was “Putting the Power of Film at the Service of the Poor.”

I was filming in Haiti just days before and days after the earthquake in January 2010 that killed over 300,000 people and left over a million people homeless. The streets were littered with mangled or burned corpses. The stench was horrific. Amputations were performed without anesthesia. It left me with a case of post-dramatic-stress disorder and forever changed my life. I knew I had to stop filming the poor and to live among the poor. That was a crazy hard decision. To serve the poor, I needed to walk with the poor, live with the poor, become poor with the poor.

Within five years, I was living in Haiti and operating a home for abandoned kids called The Santa Chiara Children’s Center. Every month, I spend one week on a picturesque, peaceful island about 120 miles north of Miami. I go for hot water, air conditioning, silence, solitude, and begging. On the island, I experience the beauty of nature. In Haiti I experience some of the worst of human nature. In Florida, my neighbors are pelicans. In Haiti, my neighbors don’t have electricity or running water or even a toilet. They live in fear of being kidnapped or robbed. I know people in Haiti who have been killed or wounded by gun violence. One was a doctor who was shot to death minutes after withdrawing money from a bank. I know many people who have been robbed at gun point. I was thrown to the ground during a robbery. I know a woman who was pregnant when she took a motorcycle taxi and the driver turned down an isolated road, stripped her of her clothing and beat her. Haiti is a nation paralyzed by a pandemic of poverty and violence and ruled by a government awash in corruption and where the elite of society finance brutal roving

gangs that put a chokehold on daily life. The Santa Chiara Children's Center is located in a deeply impoverished section of Port-au-Prince. I hear gunfire near our home almost every night.

This essay is about my struggles since the home was opened in May 2015 and the new challenges everyone in Haiti faces today, especially the chronically poor, because the poorest nation in the western hemisphere is on the edge of explosion. Everything is about to be blown to pieces.

Six years. Six very long, very difficult years. Just to reach a point where it all could fall apart. For six years, I gave every ounce of my being to the Santa Chiara Children's Center, giving hope and healing to hundreds of abandoned kids, even giving life to a few discarded infants who were just days old when they were brought to our gate unfed, unwanted. One child, just four months old, died in our home. I had to place her lifeless, tiny body in a cooler of ice until I could find her mother in Cité Soleil to sign a paper giving the funeral parlor permission to remove her remains. Another very beloved child, a child who was the heart and soul of Santa Chiara, died soon after her deranged mother removed her from our loving care. Kids arrive at our gate suffering from extreme malnutrition or with a host of other ailments, including some who were HIV positive. We took in kids that no one wanted. Many of the kids, even pre-teens and teens had never been to school, could not read or write. They came only with the tattered clothes they were wearing. Half dozen of our kids had to have surgeries to heal their health issues.

Even I had an out-patient surgery. I had a MRSA infection that caused a golf ball sized boil in my armpit that needed to be lanced. When the doctor came into the ER to lance the wound, he said he didn't have any Novocain to deaden the pain. It took two men on the hospital staff and a friend, a Passionist priest from Mexico, to hold me down during the procedure. It was barbaric. I screamed loudly throughout. Recently, the MRSA virus has infested my body causing numerous small boils on my chest, back and legs, some of which had to be lanced in Florida, mercifully with Novocain. You don't want to get sick in Haiti.

Some of our rescued kids came after enduring physical, emotional, and even sexual abuse from adults who were not equipped to be parents or guardians. One of our kids has scars on her back from being beaten with a chain. We have treated kids who suffered from an infestation of maggots in their heads and kids who have a wide array of nasty skin problems. One of our children suffers from fetal alcohol syndrome, which manifests itself in very aggressive behavior; she came to us when she was four months old and has been with us for four years. She clings to me, often nearly knocking me over.

The common thread through the lives of all the children we saved and serve was acute poverty. Most of our endangered children came from the horrific, ultra-violent slum hell known as Cité Soleil where most kids never make to their 5<sup>th</sup> birthday, where kids are routinely shot and killed or die of treatable illnesses. The children run around naked and pick through the garbage looking for something to eat. In Cité Soleil one child in each family is designated to stay awake during the night to beat away the rats with a stick. People live in tin shacks with porous roofs; when it rains, the people sleep in mud. The people eat "pies" made of dirt and contaminated water.

On my desk in my library, I have a mud pie I brought home from Haiti. I could never imagine being so hungry and so broke that I had to resort to eating something made from dirt, spices, sugar, and filthy contaminated water, something so vile it could make me very sick or even kill me. A mud pie symbolizes, for me, the extreme poverty of so many Haitians. Mud pies are baked in ovens of anguish and hopelessness.

One of our boys, who was just four years old, spent a few days in Cité Soleil to be with his mother for a special occasion. During the visit, he was shot in the arm. We needed to bring him to the hospital for surgery. Cité Soleil is hell on earth, an ungovernable zone of perpetual misery ruled by roving gangs for whom decapitation is a sport. The unbridled savagery includes burning people alive. Every few blocks are controlled by more than 30 armed factions. On one of my visits to the slum, I was surrounded by armed gang members who threatened to take my camera. Or worse. Somehow, I dug deep into my experience of being in bad places to talk my way out of danger.

I'll never forget my first visit to Cité Soleil. The widespread depravation, the tin shacks, the rotting trash, the spewing sewage, a little girl urinating in the garbage, a woman defecating in the open, naked kids with bloated bellies running barefoot through pig-infested mud...it was all too-much to take in. Then there was the fetid and nauseating stench that was intensified by the blistering heat. The place literally assaulted my senses, left me feeling helpless and emotionally wrought.

The backdrop of our six years was the on-going, insane violence which was dramatically accelerated during the last two years of widespread political protests which in the last few months morphed into a tidal wave of kidnappings and random killings that has instilled a deep fear within all the people of Haiti. Priests, nuns, doctors, and children have been kidnapped. People have been slaughtered by decapitation. Homes and businesses have been burned to the ground. Roads are routinely blocked by a wall of burning tires with thick plumes of black smoke rising high into the sky. On the drive to the hospital for my MRSA torture, I had to drive through a small opening in a wall of burning tires. That was more frightening than the lancing. During the last three years, my life was threatened on two occasions. The first was when my car was surrounded by a gang of protesters holding gas cans above my car and threatening to set in on fire with me in it. And I had no marshmallows.

There is no public safety net in Haiti. The infrastructure has collapsed into a state of total disrepair. Paved roads are littered with potholes. Endless miles of roads in Port-au-Prince are unpaved. There is virtually no garbage collection. Trash is burned on the streets which creates choking pollution. Vast swaths of the population have no electricity, no running water, no toilets. People urinate and defecate in the streets. For the poor in Haiti, every day is a struggle for survival. Gunfire and deafening loud music are the sound track of the life at Santa Chiara.

But for me personally, the worst of it happened last May. A few months early, in March, the pandemic was spreading in America and around the world like wildfire. The Haitian government banned all flights from the United States. Airlines flew empty planes into Haiti; they departed filled with Americans fleeing the violence and anticipated spike in Coronavirus in the slums of Haiti. I had a tough choice to make. My family and friends and even my Board wanted me to get

the heck out of Haiti. I looked at it from a different point of view from my personal safety. My thoughts were focused on my kids. At the time we had nearly 70 children living with us. They would be lost without me. If I left, I had no idea how long it would be before I would be permitted to return. I stayed. And I got Covid-19.

I thought I was going to die on the couch in my office. The Missionaries of Charity got me oxygen tanks. I was on oxygen 24 hours a day for seven straight days. The oxygen was administered by a 20-year-old young woman who has been my de facto daughter since she was 10 years old. The Sisters were so concerned they tried to get a priest come to me and administer the Last Rites. Kids would sneak up onto the second floor and into my office. They would look down at me and I could see the horror on their faces. The Missionaries of Charity and the children of Santa Chiara constantly prayed for me. I was 73 at the time and had asthma. I should have died. I did not.

For the last six months, not long after surviving Covid-19, I've sunk deeper and deeper into a darkness of despair. I've become easily agitated and angry. Some say it is a common after effect of Corvid. My physical and emotional tanks are empty. I have nothing left to give. Beyond the stress of daily life and death in Haiti, there is the constant financial worry. We've essentially functioned on a month-to-month basis for six years. Most months we receive far less in donations than we spend. Emergencies such as one of our two very old cars breaking down or a kid needing immediate hospitalization thrust us into a severe shortage of cash. At one point a few years ago, I carried over \$60,000 in credit card debt. Worry is often my daily bread. We relied on the extreme generosity of two major donors, one of whom is no longer able to help us due to illness. A handful of other very faithful benefactors always came to the rescue when we were on the precipice of collapse. At this moment, we have enough funds on hand to get us to perhaps early June.

To complicate matters, most of our staff are uneducated. Some can't even read or write. For many, Santa Chiara was the first job they ever had. Many are here just for the paycheck...and something to eat. Some are lazy. There is a lot of mean-spirited gossiping and lying...and a lot of stealing. The leadership team I put in place has been a great disappointment. I had hoped they would grow into the jobs I gave them. They did not. One of them has been with me for six years; he is exhausted...worn out and burned out.

As I wrote these words early on Saturday morning (April 12<sup>th</sup>), Moïse had been crying for two straight hours. Moïse was brought to us two weeks before, when he was just two weeks old. His teenage mother carried him through Cité Soleil just after giving birth. Her infant son was still covered with birth canal fluid. She handed him a stranger, an older woman, asking her to watch the baby while she got help. The mother never returned. The poor woman gave the infant tea and regular mild to drink. When she brought the child to me, the infant was starving. I had to rush out to a local small market to get baby formula, which the child practically inhaled. We had no room for one more child; nor did we have the staff to handle the constant needs of a newborn. But if the woman returned to Cite Soleil with the baby, he would die in a matter of days. I took the child, gave him his name (Creole for Moses), and gave him a loving home. Moïse's piercing, persistent, loud cries pushed me to a dark place where I felt that I could no longer do this. Yet, I

knew I could not leave, not abandon the kids I love with all my heart. Still, my nerves are frayed and I am running on empty, desperate for help. So are the poor of Haiti.

In Haiti, if a person has enough money for tomorrow, they are considered rich. When I tell my staff I have enough money to last until early June, this is beyond their comprehension. Their personal concern is for tomorrow. June is a lifetime away. They may never see June. For the poor of Haiti, every day is a struggle for survival. Many of my staff pay less than a buck to take a dilapidated old pickup truck crammed with riders to work. But they don't have the buck to get back home, which is ten hours away. They will worry about it when they are ready to leave. Then ask me for a buck.

America is besieged with many difficult problems. Our beloved nation has become deeply divided. Divisions exist in all phases and aspects of American lives. We yell at each other instead of listening to each other. Muslims and Asians are treated with suspicion and even hatred. Black lives are needlessly and repeatedly gunned down by the police. Immigrants fleeing violence and poverty from Central America and Mexico are treated like criminals. Migrant children are ruthlessly separated from their parents and placed in cages. Science is ignored and internet rumors are trusted. Reasonable gun control can't be passed. Mass shootings happen so frequently they barely pass for news. A pandemic of misinformation has caused countless unnecessary deaths from Covid-19 and is delaying the day when it is safe to return to normal life. People of color are being denied easy access to voting. The list of social and political ills could fill pages. But let me tell you this: come live a few months in a chaotic, brutal, vulgar place such as Haiti and when you return to America you will want to kiss the ground.

There is no us or them. There is only us. All of us. No exceptions. Love one another.

I had to leave the illusory fantasy of Hollywood, get off Sunset Boulevard, and enter the bitter reality of Haiti to be transformed into a new man, a man who could give himself away, even if, at times, reluctantly, in order to serve the weakest among us. Along Poverty Road, I slowly learned that mercy, compassion, and love can unite us as a human family and help us see and know that the poor of Haiti and countless other developing nations are our brothers and sisters, and we must stand with them in fraternity and solidarity. We can begin to do this by taking at least baby steps toward defying political polarization, consumerism, and militarism and putting our full trust in God's abundance, mercy, and love, no matter what name we individually use for God.



*Me and Baby Ruth. She has been with me since she was four months old.*

*Her mother was a homeless alcoholic and drug addict.*

*Baby Ruth has fetal alcohol syndrome.*

*She clings to me. She is often out of control and violent.*

*She is the embodiment of out-of-control poverty.*

The Santa Chiara Children's Center is very different than a traditional orphanage. It's more akin to being a field hospital for kids, many of whom come to us seriously ill or extremely malnourished. Thomas Paine said America was an asylum for humanity. Santa Chiara is essentially an asylum—a sanctuary—for kids fleeing hunger and abuse. When we began, we had no intention of housing children. We were simply a day care center where poor women who earn a meager living as street vendors could leave their children in the early morning and pick them up in the evening...free of charge. What I never anticipated was that a parent, usually a mother, would drop a child off and never return for their son or daughter. Within a short period of time, we had 22 kids actually living with us, and another seventy who came for the day. Initially our catch phrase was "A Place for Kids to Be Kids." In time, as we shifted from a day care center to an "orphanage," our motto became "A Home of Hope and Healing."

# SANTA CHIARA

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