

March 22, 2023

An Appeal for Assistance from a United Nations Related Fund

The following contains the highlights of the proposal that SCCC made to a private fund operated by United Nations staffers that assists organization offering humanitarian help to the poor. I thought in my last Journal from Rome where I met two men who work for an agency of the U.N. that I would share this overview of SCCC from my grant proposal with our Journal readers and donors.

The Santa Chiara Children's Center is a home for abandoned children that was founded in May 2015. Most of our children come from Cité Soleil, which is the largest and most dangerous slum in all of Haiti. We are located in a desperately poor area where few neighbors have indoor plumbing and the electrical power is out for many hours a day. The Center has limited solar power and a large diesel generator so we are off the dysfunctional Haitian energy grid. No one in our impoverished neighborhood has running water. Many do not have toilets. There are no paved roads. There is a small slum just down the hill from us. Recently, we had to raise the height of our exterior wall and add barbed wire to keep us safe inside. Many nights we can hear gunfire from the slum. Access to our home is by narrow, bumpy dirt roads. When I drive out of the gates of Santa Chiara, I realize I might not come back. Anything can happen in Haiti . . . almost none of it good.

Our kids have a hunger to be loved and to belong. They have been mistreated and abandoned. They are now loved and they know they belong to the community of Santa Chiara, where they feel safe and secure. Santa Chiara is a place where kids can just be kids without worry or fear.

Our kids come to us weary from their battle with extreme poverty, constant hunger, emotional neglect, and often physical abuse. They come wounded in many ways. Back in 2018, one member of our community of the weak was only two days old when we found him in a garbage dump where his distressed mother had left him. We gave him a name (Peter Francis) and a home. In March of 2021, a teenage girl gave birth to her child on dirt street in Cité Soleil. She somehow cut the umbilical cord and handed the newborn boy, still covered in birth canal fluid and blood, to an elderly woman, telling her she was going to get help and would be right back. She never returned. The poor elderly woman did her best to care for the infant, but she could only afford to give him tea. After waiting for about a week, she realized the mother was never going to return and so she brought the baby to Santa Chiara. I gave him the name of Moïse (Creole for Moses) and he lived with me in my second-floor apartment for the first year of his life. In 2022, the Social Services department of the Haitian government appointed me as the legal guardian of Peter and Moïse, along with five girls who all have tragic stories of abandonment; they all have "Straub" as their last name.

Often the kids who are brought to us have stories of unthinkable abuse at the hands of their parents, and they have the physical and emotional scars that come from brutal beatings. One child was brought to us on the verge of starvation. She was virtually skin and bones, and to further complicate her recovery, she was also HIV+. We cover all the medical costs associated

with keeping the kids healthy, including needed surgeries and hospitalizations for pneumonia and tuberculosis. When there is no room in the public hospitals in our area, we send the children to a private hospital. One of our younger ones has sickle cell and needs regular medical treatment.

Our kids not only come to us hungry and often very sick, but many also come bearing deep psychological wounds and feel a deep sense of isolation and abandonment. The most important thing we can do is to offer them a genuine embrace of love. Then, step by step, we feed them, clothe them, tend to their medical needs, offer them an education, and give them a chance to feel what it is like to live in a place where verbal and physical violence is strictly forbidden. We preach one message: nonviolence combined with a genuine concern for those who are weaker than us and in need of a hand. It fills my heart with joy to see the older girls helping the younger kids.

Here is one short story that touched me deeply: An 8-year-old girl came home from an external school our kids attended. She told me that a student hit her. The teacher asked the girl if she hit the kid back, which seemed like an odd question to ask. The girl said no. The teacher asked, "Why not?" The girl, who had lived at Santa Chiara for four years, said, "Papa Gerry would not like that." The message of nonviolence was sinking in.

We have a staff of 44 Haitian employees a few of whom work part-time. Many are uneducated but kind and caring people. They handle the washing of clothes (by hand) and the cleaning. We have two primary cooks and a full kitchen staff. We have five nurses on staff; two nurses work in our medical clinic and three work in routine child care. We have one full time medical doctor and a part-time pediatrician. We have two trained teachers to prepare the young children to be enrolled in an exterior school and also help the older students with their homework and tutor students who need extra academic help. The staff also includes a psychiatrist and a social worker. We also have a mechanic who keeps our two old cars running. We have a management staff of college educated people who deeply care about the children's wellbeing. With all this help, for the first time in their lives, the kids feel safe and wanted. I never use the word "orphanage." Santa Chiara is a HOME of hope and healing.

Except for the infants, all of our children attend a private school that is walking distance from SCCC. We cover the cost of the school fees, books, and uniforms. In the summer of 2017, we built a simple, one-room schoolhouse to accommodate the kids who were unable to attend an external school because they had never been to school and could not even read or write.

Rationale of the project:

Haiti is a profoundly impoverished country teetering on the brink of anarchy. Violence and chaos have spread anew and intensified to unthinkable levels. In the first six months of 2022, the United Nations documented 934 killings, 684 serious injuries and 680 kidnappings in the capital city of Port-au-Prince. Gangs have taken over poor neighborhoods and blocked the roads that connect the city with the rest of the country. By July, the scale of insane violence was dominating all facets of life. According to the U.N., 234 people were killed in the Port-au-Prince slum of Cité Soleil in the four days from July 8 to July 12 alone. Cité Soleil is a dark and dangerous place, a district so wretched that few outsiders dare enter. And local residents are afraid to leave their homes. More

than a quarter million people are crammed into its three-square miles, making it the sprawling capital's largest slum.

People here live in porous, rusting, peak-roofed tin shacks, most without electricity. On rainy nights, water seeps in and the poor sleep in the mud. Open sewers and the stench of rotting garbage intensify the ugly reality. Children run around naked or in tattered clothes, and many of them have never been to school. In the evening, some kids are forced to stay awake all night and beat rats away with sticks. (The rat population outnumbers the human 10 to 1.)

Pigs rummage through trash in search of food. Women and children squat in rancid, insect-infested rubbish to defecate and urinate. People eat "pies" made of mud and contaminated water. Many children have worms, which consume up to 20 percent of a child's daily nutritional intake. Half the children in Cité Soleil will die before age five. Parents are sometimes forced to give up their children to servitude because they cannot afford to feed them.

The area is riddled with violence. More than 30 armed gangs roam the streets, each controlling a few blocks apiece. Murder, rape, kidnapping, looting, and shootings are common. Stray bullets often hit children. Police presence is minimal. Reformers are routinely assassinated. People are beheaded or burned alive for opposing the neighborhood gang leader. A few years ago, I would not hesitate to drive by myself into Cité Soleil to deliver water to a pregnant woman or rescue a sick child. That is no longer possible.

Once a month I return to Florida for a week of stillness, silence, hot water, air-conditioning and begging, and I am escorted from Santa Chiara to the airport by an armed policeman wearing a bulletproof vest. His job is to prevent me from being kidnapped — or worse. There was an attempt to kidnap me in early January 2023, but the cop accompanying me spotted the danger and had the driver take evasive action...and we escaped.

Once a month I return to Florida for a week of stillness, silence, hot water, air-conditioning and begging. I also meet telephonically with the Santa Chiara Board to review our operations. The important part of this story is to explain that, nowadays, I am escorted from Santa Chiara to the airport by an armed policeman wearing a bulletproof vest. His job is to prevent me from being kidnapped — or worse. There was an attempt to kidnap me in early January 2023, but the cop accompanying me spotted the danger and had the driver take evasive action...and we escaped.

Most charitable organizations have either left Haiti or abandoned Port-au-Prince and relocated into a somewhat safer countryside. Our presence in this poor part of the city is essential not only to our 44 kids, but also those kids who will be seeking refuge in the future. Just last week we welcomed an 18-month-old girl.

The choice for the target group:

Children are especially vulnerable in Haiti. Besides being abused by their parents and other family members, they are prime targets for kidnappers, who grab kids on the way home from school. They know that parents will pay anything to get their children back. Many children are killed by the captors. Girls are especially vulnerable. Of our 41 children, 35 are girls. The six boys

living with us are all under seven years of age. In addition, there are another dozen kids who spend part or all of each day at Santa Chiara, where they are able to eat a good meal and have fun.

Bency Clare, now 13, timidly walked into my life on April 19, 2016, shortly before her seventh birthday. She was frightened and abused. She was also tough as nails. She had experienced the worst that life could inflict on a child. Bency's mom lived in Cité Soleil. She regularly drank whisky and smoked marijuana, probably to deaden the pain of her life. She beat Bency with an electrical cord and cut her with a razor blade. The girl had to poop in a plastic bag.

Bency was often left alone for days while her mother visited friends outside Port-au-Prince. Bency had only one blanket, and bugs bit her at night. With only scraps of bread and an occasional military field ration to eat, she had learned to forage for discarded food in the garbage dumps that dot the dismal landscape. She could not read or write, yet her vocabulary contained words that would make most adults shudder.

Bency arrived at Santa Chiara carrying a collection of horrible memories. On those few occasions when her mother visited, Bency ran and hid. Her emotional scars took many years to heal. They will never disappear.

Bency's story, sadly, is not unique. Statistics speak to the depth and devastation of Haitian poverty. Some 138,000 Haitian children die of preventable diseases each year. Ten percent die before their 5th birthday, most from treatable diseases. Especially young children are 15 times more likely to die from diarrhea and pneumonia than from AIDS. Meanwhile, one in four children is moderately to severely malnourished. Roughly 45 percent of all 5-year-olds exhibit stunted growth and brain development due to lack of adequate nutrition.

To make matters worse for Bency, she did not have legal papers. She was officially a nonperson, which made it impossible to register her for school. On October 29, 2016, Bency's life dramatically changed: I picked up a certificate signed by a judge stating she was my daughter. Her name became Bency Clare Straub. During those early days, she told me she loved having her own mattress and a clean blanket. She really loved having a toilet and a shower. The doll I'd given her that August was still in the box months later. She would take it out and play with it, then put it back to keep it safe. I vividly remember the day Bency said her first sentence in English: "Dad, I want a cookie."

A cookie, a hug, and lots of love — what else could an abused 7-year-old want? I taught Bency how to rinse her mouth with mouthwash after brushing her teeth. She smiled at the vibrant taste — an easily forgotten moment worth cherishing. At first, she clung to me. In time, she became more comfortable and ran around with the other kids. She began smiling more.

Because Bency was used to searching through garbage for scraps, she would hoard anything she didn't eat. She feared hunger. I had to convince her we had plenty of food and that she should not take anything from the trash. It was a hard lesson to learn. One day, I had a reason to open

the small suitcase she had brought with her. I was shocked to see hundreds of ants feasting on all the concealed food. I had to introduce her to the refrigerator and its importance.

I could fill a book with heart-breaking stories of the children who have come through Santa Chiara over the last eight years. At one time we had 72 kids living with us. Since the upsurge in violence, many of the employees' kids spend time with us during the week. Two of our children have died. One died in our home; she was only four months old. That was a horrific day. The undertaker could not remove her body without permission from her mother. I had to place her lifeless body in a cooler and cover her in ice to slow her decomposition, as it would take days to find her mother in Cité Soleil. The girl's name was Kenja. She was Bency's half-sister.

The other child who died was not yet three. She was removed from us by her deranged mother. The little girl was HIV-positive and required daily medication. The mother withheld these medicines, and her child died. Her name was Tamysa.

I have found wisdom in the collective stories of these Haitian children as they teach me about the nature and unity of human life. In Haiti, I see the pain of the human condition, and it has shattered my false ideas and values into thousands of pieces. In Haiti, human misery is raw and real; I see things in their nakedness. The cross is around every corner. In Haiti, there are no false idols to distract my gaze from the misery. There is no place to turn away from the suffering.

BENEFICIARIES

The key to escaping chronic poverty is education. With the construction of the school at least 60 children will be receiving a quality education without fear of being kidnapped or a victim of gunfire.

Vision:

Creating and nurturing a loving and peaceful environment in which children (primarily girls) have a chance to grow, learn, and reach their full human potential.

Mission:

The Santa Chiara Children's Center's sacred mission is to provide complete systemic change in the development of orphaned, abandoned, displaced, abused, and neglected children from the slums of Port-au-Prince, Haiti. They arrive hungry, malnourished, and bearing all kinds of physical, emotional, and psychological wounds that need to be lovingly embraced and healed.

SCCC offers the children:

- compassion,
- a nonviolent home
- daily nutritious meals
- basic education
- medical care
- a sense of dignity and solidarity for the common good.

Ultimately, in nurturing and enabling these children over their years at SCCC (up to 17 years of age) the objective is for them to succeed as adults who become compassionate contributing citizens who understand the importance of non-violence in all spheres of their lives.

Achievements of the Organization

Santa Chiara Children's Center work has been written about in the highly acclaimed Notre Dame Magazine.

The New York Times and the *Los Angeles Times* carried articles about Mr. Straub's previous two nonprofits that were devoted to putting the power of film at the service of the poor produced over twenty documentaries on poverty in India, Kenya, Uganda, Brazil, Peru, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, Jamaica, Haiti, and The Philippines and that also filmed the plight of the homeless in Los Angeles, Detroit, Philadelphia, and Budapest, Hungary. His work was also featured on a segment of the PBS broadcast *Religion and Ethics Weekly*.

For his work among the poorest of the poor, Mr. Straub was awarded three honorary doctorate degrees.

Budget

The Santa Chiara Children's Center has an annual budget of \$336,000.

Not included in that budget is the cost of three essential items.

1) A better used car

One of our two SUV's that are used to haul food, diesel fuel, jugs of pure drinking water, and propane gas tanks is 12 years old and constantly requiring costly repairs. We live in a remote area that is not easily accessible. Without two reliable SUV's we would be in great trouble.

Our 2009 Nissan Xterra needs to be immediately replaced. A good used 2015 comparable model would cost about **\$25,000**.

2) Additional Solar Power System

We are partially free of fossil fuel now. We basically have two power systems: solar and generator. The solar system can power the entire compound, including the first and second floors of the main house, the one-room school, the older girl's dorm, and the external kitchen during the day. We need to run the generator up to 8 hours a day to store enough energy to run the compound at night, including all the appliances, such as the refrigerator, freezer, and fans.

If we could double the capacity of our solar-panel system, it could be storing energy during the day to run our entire facility at night.

With two independent solar-panel systems, we would free of our fossil fuel dependency by 95%. We would need to run the generator only on rainy or cloudy days, and to run 20 minutes a day to operate a pump the send water for bathing to the roof.

Being essentially free of fossil fuel is important at this time because the gangs have disrupted the flow of fuel to the markets, and so the cost of fuel has skyrocketed to over \$20 a gallon. (Just a year ago, the cost of fuel was under \$5.00 per gallon.) In the impoverished area in which we live, most people are without electricity for long stretches of the day.

We need to purchase 24 Trojan batteries (6 volt / 225 AMP), 9 Mono solar panels of 330 watt each, a SHENIDER inverter of 4 kilowatt, a regulator power track of 100 AMP, a safety switch of 60 MP/600V AC.

The approximate cost to be virtually free of fossil fuel dependency is **\$32,865**

3) The construction of a new school on our property

This project will require the demolition of our current one-room temporary schoolhouse, as well the nearby dorm for 8 older girls. We have detailed architectural plans we can share, including video animation of the proposed building. We estimate the cost to be at least \$125,000 and perhaps higher due to inflation and other factors.

The two guys I met after Sunday Mass at S. Isidoro were really good guys, both from Ireland, who sincerely wanted to help Santa Chiara. But the mechanism for that help seemed unclear. The Help Fund is administered by a woman who is a high-ranking UN staffer; she "unofficially" operates the fund within the UN structure. They do not have a great deal of resources. People in the field, such as the guys I meet, often discover good people really making a difference in the lives of the poor and they try to get them some much needed help. The guys never really knew how much money was available in the fund. It was unclear whether I should go small or big in my request. I saw from an application filled out by a priest in India tirelessly working on behalf of refugee children that his application went on for pages and pages in which he detailed a specific program. While the grant was awarded it was for a very meager amount...so small it did not seem to be worth all the work it took to prepare the application.

In the end, it was suggested I go big and state my three biggest needs. Because most funding seems to support certain programs within a school or institution, I decided that I would use the form to simply talk about what Santa Chiara had done for nearly eight years, then I listed our three most urgent needs, which together totaled over \$200,000 beyond our yearly budget of \$360,000. Dreaming the impossible is what we do in Haiti, then do it. Every day. Before the form was officially submitted, I gave an early draft to the two guys and the woman overseeing the fund...which I learned that people (mostly UN agency employees and friends) raise funds by such means as bake sales—it would take a lot of sold cookies to raise the funds I needed. I also learned that fund was an informal and personal venture and not a formal legal entity, and that they have a cap of \$3,000 on donations. To say this news was disappointed is an understatement. On two consecutive nights I was up until nearly one in the morning working on the form. Some break from work this was turning into.

But there was some brightness on the horizon. The three UN people really wanted to help and were genuinely impressed by Santa Chiara. Fr. Hugh told me that Liam spoke very highly of my efforts. The plan was for me to drop the car and the school and focus on the solar system, making the Help Fund a co-sponsor of the purchase and installment. Liam spoke with me after Mass on Sunday and said he had asked some friends to help him match the 3K grant...and he was successful. He said he felt confident they would be able to send \$6,000 this week. I shared this news with a very good friend in America and she also pledged \$3,000. Another friend and long-time donor had told me last week that when I get home there will be a \$10,000 check for Santa Chiara waiting for me. I called him and asked if I could apply to the solar system. He reminded me that all his donations are unrestricted. I knew that, but wanted to let him know anyway. Suddenly, we had \$19,000 earmarked for the solar system. My friend said he would send the \$13,000 shortage. I told him that was not necessary because we will manage.

I am sharing all this to give readers a resource that can use to do help spread the work about Santa Chiara and our needed for funding during this dire and dangerous times in Haiti. I felt the summary of what we do before the actual presentation of our three most important and urgent needs would be helpful if you want to help raise funds for Santa Chiara. Not so long ago, one donor held a garage sale consisting of things her friends donated to the sale. I can't recall the exact amount raise, but it was considerable and greatly surprised me.

An SCCC staffer sent me this photo last week. It is a reminder of what all this effort is about: the kids!

*Well...you'll just have to use your imagination
because I cannot move the photo from WhatsApp to my computer.*