

October 29, 2023

## *Stepping Away*

Since May 2015, I have endured endless trials and tribulations in Haiti. For many years, every day was a struggle for survival. Moreover, I endured endless waves of barbarous violence, which dramatically increased and become more deadly in the last two years. My life was threatened on two occasions; the most frightening was when my car was surrounded by gang's members, one of whom held a jug of gasoline high over my car, threatening to set in on fire with me and an 8-year-old girl inside. When Covid hit back in 2021, airlines flew empty planes to Haiti to evacuate all Americans because Haiti had closed all entrance to the country from foreigners. The U.S. Embassy strongly urged all Americans to evacuate Haiti. I elected to stay because I knew that if I left, I would indefinitely be unable to return. I could not abandon my kids. I stayed and I contract covid, was on oxygen around the clock, and nearly died on the couch in my office.

No matter the threats, no matter the obstacles, no matter the challenges, I stayed because I loved the children I served. In the early days, we had no running water or electricity. We also had no car. I traveled about in uncomfortable, crowded tap-taps and I made countless peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Much of my time was spent in woefully bad hospitals with sick kids. One infant died in our home. We opened our door to kids no one else wanted, including kids who were HIV-positive. Many of our kids were victims of physical or sexual abuse. Most had never been to school...or had ever seen a toilet.

Up until very recently, I spent twenty days a month in Haiti and ten days a month in Florida, excluding two long, tiring travel days. For the first four years, I was the only driver and the only one with a credit card. I had to do all the shopping. In Haiti, I endured times of shortages of food and fuel. Yet I stayed. It has been hard for me to travel about Port-au-Prince accompanied by a cop with a machine gun sitting next to me. Innocent children have been abducted and killed. Nuns and priests have been killed. An Italian nun who tirelessly served poor children was shot and killed in her car which was then set on fire. In Haiti, no one can help or protect another without threatening their own survival. It sickened me to see the corpses of murdered people, including those who were burned to death. I am always the only white person flying to Haiti, as the American Embassy has repeatedly warned Americans not to come to Haiti. Yet I came and stayed. I felt I was needed, that without my physical presence, the home would not survive. That is no longer true.

I am no longer of any use in Haiti, beyond being a cash mule. The heightened gang violence makes it clear that I am a prime target for kidnapping. I am no longer permitted to drive with the staff because my presence could put them in jeopardy. It is time for me to dramatically reduce my time in Haiti. Mr. Gabens Preval and his highly competent and dedicated staff are far more capable of running the operation than I am or ever was. The Santa Chiara Academy has its own professional leadership that reports directly to Mr. Gabens. The home and school are in great hands. The leadership have hearts that beat with love for the children.

The Santa Chiara Children's Center and the Santa Chiara Academy are miracles. They are bright beacons of hope in a dark, desperate, and violent nation. I have fully dedicated myself to being

an instrument in the materialization of that miracle that was made possible by the generosity of so many loving and deeply compassionate people. But it is now time for me to nurture and support the Santa Chiara Children's Center and the Santa Chiara Academy from a distance with occasional visits to Haiti for very short periods of time lasting for less than a week every six weeks. This reduced schedule will commence as soon as Dr. Stéphanie's parole visa status is resolved. Until then I will spend a week in Haiti followed by two weeks in Florida.

The thrust of my time after Steph arrives in Florida will be fully dedicated to writing and to public speaking in support of the poor in general and specifically to dual entities of Santa Chiara. I need to fundraise more actively, as we do not have the funds to make it to the end of this year.

Writing this has filled me with sadness. I always thought I would die in Haiti. It pains me to dramatically reduce the time I am physically present to the children. Yet, the reality is clear: I can be more effective from my home base in Vero Beach. I want to focus on being a voice for the poor and to publishing books through Pax et Bonum Communications. The royalties from the books we publish will go to the Santa Chiara Children's Center and Academy.

It is my prayer and sincere hope that all my compassionate and generous supporters over the last 23 years will continue to support Santa Chiara...and if possible, offer a modest hand of support to Pax et Bonum Communications. I am NOT slowing down, just reducing the struggle.

I wish each of you abundance of peace and everything good.

***Gerry Straub***

PS. I return to Haiti today. I will be there one week. When I return to Vero Beach, I must prepare for my trip to Iowa where I will speak at a high school and briefly speak about Haiti at six Masses in four churches, as well as give a presentation at a lunch sponsored by the Twinning Project, which links parishes in the United States with poor parishes in Haiti. The surgical procedure on one of my legs will be done either before Iowa or after that trip.



Taken last evening on my walk.