Students develop personal bonds with Haitian restaveks

The Haitian students and Pros students learned about the culture of Haiti firsthand.

By MICHAEL CREDIF
Features Editor

Haiti is a country of great diversity, culture, and poverty. At about 19 years old, he is one of the oldest children living in the home for restaveks, so he had probably been exposed to a considerably longer duration of hardship than his peers.

Visited in a moment of truth, he showed Haitian emotion. The bond between the two students was unbreakable.

Students had been learning about Haiti for half a semester in Professor Peter-Surial's Haiti Society and Pros class, prior to spending their spring break in Les Cayes.

The information they learned in class was valuable, but could not replace firsthand experience.

As planned, the students visited a home for restaveks, whose students and answer questions about sustainable agriculture.

Matthew Wilk is concerned that if we will keep Haiti on the calendar end of this charitable relief effort, but is not suggesting that it be abandoned. He believes that we sign aid is a good thing, but that imports may be a problem.

According to a 2008 report by the U.S. Department of Hawaii, 84 percent of Haiti's gross domestic product is spent on agriculture, 'with cattle, coffee and rice among other major crops.'

Around the same time that students were going to Haiti, the President Jean-Bertrand Aristide was returning. It was said that the President Jean-Olivier Vallier was also returning to Haiti.
Sources say that he returned to Haiti because he is ill, or because he wants to help in recovering from the 2010 earthquake. Duvalier and Aristide have vastly different political histories.

Aristide was an advocate for the poor, who wanted to levy taxes on the rich. Some of his political beliefs were met with resistance.

A dangerous militant group called the Tontons Macoute made it difficult for impoverished Haitians to vote. They were the demographic most likely to vote for Aristide. Even talking about him was dangerous at one time.

Even today, Peter-Raoul does not speak highly of the government.

The 7.0 earthquake of 2010 was just one more event that hampered the democratic voting process.

But the political climate cannot be oversimplified to a battle between the rich and poor, even though poverty is a big issue. Today, Aristide’s ideology is embraced by some and resisted by others.

“They’re just as [politically] mixed as we are,” student Katharine Saso said.

The distribution of wealth in Haiti is very unbalanced.

Adult student Domita Achola said that the rich accumulate more wealth, while the poor only get poorer.

The students were embedded in an unfamiliar culture and their limited Creole made verbal communication challenging at times. Translators were available for assistance, but it was sometimes difficult to locate them immediately.

Nonetheless, Peter-Raoul was pleased that her students made efforts to integrate into the Haitian culture, especially when every single student attended an optional religious ceremony, even after a long day.

This was the kind of attitude, the “visceral heart,” the “beating heart,” that Professor Peter-Raoul later described.

Prior to their departure, Peter-Raoul said that she wanted her students to make their best efforts to communicate in Creole, even if their understanding of the language is very basic.

She wanted to send the message that her students were willing to integrate into Haitian society, rather than expect the Haitians to speak English.

“You exceeded my high expectations,” she later said to her class.

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