Praxis students prepare to visit Haiti

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Staff Writer

Adult student Domitila Achola, who works full-time at The Kingston Hospital, is taking 11 credits and supports her five kids—four of which live in Kenya. This spring she will be visiting Haiti for Haiti Solidarity and Praxis, a class taught by professor of philosophy Mar Peter-Raoul.

Peter-Raoul is taking a small group of students to a predetermined site in Les Cayes, Haiti. The class plans to paint the outside of an orphanage building and visit a home that supports restaveks.

Restaveks are “children that are put into slavery by their own parents because they can’t afford to pay for stuff like school,” adult student Joseph Barkes said. “They’re given to wealthier families by their parents; restavek means ‘to stay with.’”

Peter-Raoul said that there is a home in Haiti that has been built specifically for restaveks. Marist praxis students plan to visit the home, interact with the children and possibly bring art supplies, such as paint. The students plan to bring back some paintings to display to the Marist community.

The potential to hold a second Haiti Solidarity Day on campus is one possible outlet for displaying the work, but these plans are too far away to confirm.

Although the students do not depart for Haiti until March 11, preparations are already underway. The students have been trying to learn basic Haitian Creole to better interact with the restavek children.

Katharine Case, a student in the class, said that junior Matthew Wilk has been spearheading the students’ effort to learn the language. He teaches the class basic phrases with the use of Google translator. While the students do not expect to be fluent in just a few weeks, they desire a basic grasp of the language.

“Even if we speak haltingly, it sends a powerful message that we are attempting to join folks, not just expecting them to join us,” Peter-Raoul said.

Achola’s background from her home nation of Kenya is helping her to prepare for the trip to Haiti. Her mother used to take in orphans and cook food for them. She also left behind a plot of land to be used for future orphans.

“We used to have so many people in my house, my mother would cook and cook...” Achola said. “I was also inspired by Dr. Farmer.”

Co-founder of Partners in Health, Paul Farmer’s efforts in Haiti have been described in the book “Mountains Beyond Mountains” by Tracy Kidder.

The idea of establishing a praxis site in Kenya one day was mentioned during class.

Students are excited about the trip, but many are unsure of what to expect because they have never been to a developing nation before. This is not the case for Achola.

“I’m not nervous about anything. I know what I’m expecting to see. Maybe they’re better [off than the Kenyans] but I don’t think so,” she said.

The praxis students will return from their trip on March 17 and they hope to bring back photographs.

“This is just the beginning. First what we’re going to do is make the connection,” Achola said.