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## Spring Break Destination: Haiti (The Clarion News Article)

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## Spring Break Destination: Haiti

An LU student recounts her life-changing trip to the Caribbean nation

Posted: Wednesday, March 29, 2017 8:32 pm by Jeri Perkins [myclarionnews@gmail.com](mailto:myclarionnews@gmail.com)

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My name is Jeri Perkins. I'm from San Jose, California and I'm a junior majoring in broadcast journalism. I and twelve other participants were given an opportunity by the Dr. Jabulani Beza International Student Center at Lincoln University to travel to Haiti during spring break. This was a life-changing experience that opened our hearts to the need for service in Haiti. As a journalist and activist my goal is to serve as a voice for the people by telling their stories. We visited two major cities in Haiti: Port-au-Prince and Jacmel.

At the historic Sugar Cane Plantation in Port-au-Prince we learned about the independence fight. Approximately 300 slaves worked for the French between the years of 1791-1893. The plantation was a result of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. In 1804, Haiti became the first black nation in the Western Hemisphere to become liberated.

As soon as I stepped on the island of Haiti I saw the struggle in the people's eyes. Many work all day for a few gourdes (67 gourdes = \$1 U.S.) to support their families. Traffic in Haiti was hectic. The roads are rough. As we drove through the streets people would approach our van, asking for money and attempting to sell their products.

Without knowing the local language (Creole) we would simply say "no merci." It was tough looking in the eyes of people less fortunate than myself, and not having the resources to help all of them. However, each place we went to was an opportunity to plant a seed of hope for the future.

Melissa's Hope Foundation is a Haitian orphanage for children with disabilities. It is located northeast of Port Au Prince, Haiti in Croix-des-Bouquets. It is home to 20 local children with disabilities. Also, it serves the community as a school and summer camp to local kids who come to learn, play and have a meal.

I spoke with Jean Pascal Bain, the director of Melissa's Hope, about the resources needed to provide opportunities for the disabled children.

Perkins: What year did the Melissa's Hope Foundation start?

*Bain: In 2008.*

Perkins: What is the significance behind the name Melissa's Hope Foundation?

*Bain: Following the earthquake in 2010, we wanted to have a name that was fitting to help special-needs kids. My wife and I had an idea from a story we read about this little girl in the*

*orphanage named Melissa who was adopted, came to the states, received medical assistance and started walking again. We wanted every child to have the same hope of having a better life that Melissa did.*

Perkins: What resources do you receive to help run the orphanage?

*Bain: We are a U.S.-based 501(c)(3) non-profit organization recognized by the government. However, most of the donations we receive are from organizations in the states.*

Lincoln students enjoyed their time playing with the children. We collected a donation for supplies to support the running of the orphanage and school. Also, we look forward to seeing updates on the impact our visit have had on the opportunities provided to children at Melissa's Hope.

At Village de Noailles in Port-au-Prince we learned about the rich history of the island. The country's constitution was signed in 1801, shortly after Haiti gained its independence in 1804. The nation runs by the words written on the flag "L'UNION FAIT LA FORCE" which basically means "united we stand, divided we fall." These words are significant to the meaning behind the colors on the flag. Red representing the blood shed for independence and blue representing the victory of freedom.

We visited one of the most dangerous cities in the Western Hemisphere called City Soleil, or "City of the Sun." As soon as we stepped out of the van we were greeted by children. They instantly held out their hands for water, food, and clothes. My heart was filled with sympathy.

Growing up I was blessed with an abundance of resources. I could not imagine living days, weeks, months and even years without simple necessities. It gave me a greater understanding of the opportunities I take for granted every day. As we walked throughout the city we visited homes destroyed by heavy rain and filled with mud.

In one home I saw a family gathered together. The mother spoke to me in Creole. Although there was a language barrier, I understood her plea for help. The children looked at me as if I was their savior, someone with money and resources. I had nothing - just a heart to serve. I gave each of them a hug and with assistance from a translator I said "Je reviendrai," ("I'll be back.")

Carefully we walked through the streets of the city, unaware of its history. The gentlemen made a circle around the ladies to protect us from traffic and spectators. I did not understand the social dynamics of how the city operated. But according to one source, the city is under the power of the drug trade. The locals had to ask permission for us to enter the city. By having the courage to enter the city we earned respect.

As I stepped through the mud in my Tahiri dress and BCBG shoes, I felt the Haitian experience changing me. I did not care how hot and humid it was, how dirty my clothes were, or how fuzzy my hair looked. At that moment I realized the difference in Haitian and American cultures. Many Americans are born into opportunity. However, the people in City Soleil have nothing but hope in the future being brighter than the present and the past.

As we loaded the vans to depart from the facility, children ran after us, holding out their hands for anything we might give them. We reached through the windows and gave them everything we had access to. But it was not – and will never be - enough.

At Sakalakawel, an earth-ship project, we helped build a school, amphitheater, and community center. The construction was to provide running water in the facilities. At the end of the day we were exhausted, and wondering how the people complete such strenuous tasks in extreme weather conditions – and they do it daily. The weather in Haiti is similar to the weather in Missouri, a cycle of heat, humidity and rain.

While there we met with a team belonging to the Haitian Media Federation. We discussed how political turmoil affects the media’s ability to tell stories, without facing repercussion from the government. In Haiti, journalists sometimes risk their lives to objectively report the truth. Freedom of speech and the First Amendment enjoyed by Americans does not exist in Haiti, where censorship laws govern the rules of broadcast, print, and online journalism.

I have a lot of respect for the risks Haitian journalists assume to serve as voices of the people. I look forward to collaborating with the federation to produce news coverage. Merging two media cultures together will spark a revolution necessary to create political, social, and economic reform in Haiti.

As Lincoln students we are given an opportunity to live out the legacy of Dr. Jabulani Beza by traveling globally, raising awareness for developing countries. Now that we have seen the need for service in Haiti, we have entered a life-long partnership with the country. I now feel obligated to use my platform as an American journalist to globally report in places where the people’s voices are silenced.



Aaron Keith gives away his belongings to the kids of Cite Soleil in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. March 16, 2017. (Photo taken by Duwon Clark)



Mountainside view on the way to Bassin Bleu in Jacmel, Haiti. March 18, 2017.  
(Photo by Duwon Clark)



LU students at the Universite Haiti Lumiere in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. March 15, 2017.  
(Photo taken by Duwon Clark)



LU students with children at the Melissa's Hope orphanage in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. March 14, 2017.  
(Photo taken by Duwon Clark)



LU students visit Melissa's Hope orphanage in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. March 14, 2017.  
(Photo taken by Duwon Clark)



LU students at the Historic Sugar Cane Park in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. March 14, 2017.  
(Photo by Duwon Clark)



LU students help build Sakalaawel earthship project in Jacmel, Haiti. March 17, 2017.  
(Photo by Duwon Clark)



LU students visit Cite Soleil in Port-au-Prince, Haiti March 16, 2017.  
(Photo taken by Duwon Clark)



LU student Jeri Perkins accepts her certificate as an honorary citizen of Cite Soleil in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. March 16, 2017. (Photo taken by Duwon Clark)