



MATABONITE REPORT

An occasional newsletter to the friends of the Catholic Young Adult Association of Matabonite, Haiti, and the contributors to the David A. Goy Memorial Fund. Also available on the internet: www.richmonddiocese.org/hajel

June 2007

HAITIAN HOKIES

Laura Prangley, a one of the students at Virginia Tech who visited Matabonite on their spring break this year, wrote this article about their visit for The Collegiate Times, the school paper.

Walking 20 miles to class and being required to learn a foreign language may seem like extreme measures, but for 41-year-old Gabriel Thélus, these were just two of the many challenges he faced as a Haitian citizen in order to study at Virginia Tech 15 years ago.

Gabriel was given the unique opportunity to study at Virginia Tech with the help of Brother Cosmas, a Xaverian Brother who had known Gabriel through multiple mission trips. Through the funding from parishes of the Diocese of Richmond, his education was made possible. This was something Gabriel felt very fortunate about considering he came from a very poor family and did not have a chance to go to college in Haiti.

Since graduating in 1994 at the top of his class with a degree in plant agriculture, he has been drastically making efforts to change dynamics in the countryside of Haiti.

"When I first returned to Matabonite, Haiti, I felt the need to better the education," Gabriel said.

As a result, an elementary school called St. Rose de Lima was started through the funding provided by Virginia Tech's Newman Community and the Diocese of Richmond. Currently, there are about 90 students who attend the elementary school.

Although he admits he was tempted by the encouragement of others to stay in the United States, he knew he had to stick to his word. "I had one goal and that was to get an education, and bring it back to Haiti," Gabriel said.

Gabriel's passion for change comes as no surprise. Even when he was in high school, he was thinking of ways he could improve his hometown in Haiti.

"I felt the best way to make a change was to work collaboratively with others. As a result, I started an association with fellow community members, and since then, every summer we come together and meet to discuss projects and new ideas," he said.

A lot of Gabriel's own vision for Matabonite, Haiti, stems from his father's influence.

"He was a very responsible person. I recognized how much he loved this place, and he really wanted to change the way of living for this population. He spent his whole life to do so," he said.

Among some of the future goals Gabriel hopes to work toward is building a high school and technical school, bringing a market to the area, resurfacing the bumpy roads and having a

soccer field for organized sports. However, his utmost desire is "to see living condition improve, for everyone to have a place to stay, bring electricity to this area and have running water."

On a typical day, he wakes up at seven a.m. to work on projects, such as the most recent one to build ten houses for members of the association, and adheres to his administrative tasks until it becomes dark outside. Also, his three children and wife are very important to his everyday routine.

As for hobbies Gabriel only has one: "Work is my hobby. Even when I am sleeping I am thinking about my work. I go to bed late because I want to do a lot."

Despite all of the difficult obstacles he overcomes on a daily basis, Gabriel said, "I don't get discouraged ... seeing change gives me motivation."

Gabriel has graciously opened his home to over 50 groups of visitors and continues to do so. Last week a group of six Virginia Tech students traveled to his Haiti to help out their community and learn more about their lifestyle.

GABRIEL VISITS ST. MARGARET SCHOOL

From Carol Delss, principal of St. Margaret School in Bel Air, Maryland, we have this report on Gaby's recent visit. There is a Tech connection here, too, since Mrs. Delss' son Eric and daughter-in-law Erinn are Tech alums, and Erinn is the god-mother of one of Gaby's children.

After two years, Gabriel returned to St. Margaret School to visit with the children of the school that collected 1,000,000 pennies for St. Rose of Lima School in Matabonite. The children were so excited to see him and hear about what he is doing with the pennies and how the school has grown over the past several years.



The Million Pennies Bridge foundations, begun with the pennies from St. Margaret's

Gabriel visited classrooms from kindergarten to grade 8 and saw over 600 children. He showed them a video of the building of the bridge which their pennies helped to build. The children could get a sense of the hard work it is taking and of the countryside and people of Matabonite. Building a bridge is a slow process, but it is 2/3 done. How wonderful! The children learned about what foods Haitians eat and about a day in the life of an elementary school child in Haiti. They were full of questions for Gabriel. They wanted to learn as much as they could from him.



Gabriel Thélus, Carol Delss and the Angel

Gabriel also participated in a May procession with the pastor, teachers, and children of St. Margaret School. After the recitation of the rosary and some scripture readings the children presented to Gabriel a wooden carved angel to take back to the school. The angel, protector of valleys and villages, will remind the children of St. Rose of Lima that the children of St. Margaret are always praying for them, and that this angel is a symbol of the protection we hope they always feel from us. The children blessed Gabriel and his work in Matabonite and at the conclusion sang to him, "O Lespri Sen" in Creole. The children enjoyed Gabriel so much and prayed for his safe return.

HAITIAN HOKIES: GABRIEL'S VISIT WITH THE STUDENTS OF THE NEWMAN CATHOLIC COMMUNITY OF VIRGINIA TECH

Alison Smith, who recently graduated from Virginia Tech, gives us this report of Gaby's recent visit to Blacksburg. Alison had previously visited Matabonite (with Laura Prangley and others from Tech) in March.

For a brief moment in time, Virginia Tech stood at the center of the world. Since the tragic events on April 16, the atmosphere of the tranquil campus immediately changed. Help flooded in from across the world: the Red Cross, professionally trained rescue teams, grief counselors, messages and banners from universities across the world, and even boxes of homemade cookies. As we struggled to understand this senseless tragedy, an important step in the healing process came from a brief visit of Gabriel Thélus, a 1994 graduate of Virginia Tech.

The Newman Catholic Community, a student-run organization at Virginia Tech, had been preparing for the impending visit of Gabriel for over a month before the events occurred. The main

purpose of the visit was to revitalize our relationship with the Matabonite Community and to increase the level of involvement of students and faculty at Virginia Tech. Despite the somber mood, we wanted to forge ahead with the visit.



Gabriel with Alison Smith in the living room of the Newman Center, the Catholic Student Center at Virginia Tech.

Gabriel arrived at Virginia Tech and was instantly captivated by the memorials and outpourings of sympathy that had consumed his alma mater. It reminded us of how fortunate we are to have received this incredible amount of concern. There are so many people that experience unbelievable heartache every day and never receive this kind of support.

Gabriel spent his time with us sharing the many difficult situations that he has experienced in his life and encouraging us to work towards a more positive future. We had planned this weekend to help our "Haitian Hokie," but instead, he gave us the aid that we were in desperate need of.

Yes, we will prevail, much as Haiti has done in the wake of every situation that it has faced. The Newman Community will use this indelible mark of tragedy to strengthen our connection to Gabriel and his work in Matabonite. We are extremely grateful to have had the chance for him to come and remind us of the inner courage that we always had. For one day we all were Hokies but we will always remember every day to urge others, in the words of Albert Schweitzer, to help life where you find it.



Our Haitian Hokie with Some of His Fellow Hokies on the Recent Visit

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