Our year in review

As I reflect on Haiti in 2010, I see mounting statistics—earthquake victims, hurricane and flood victims, cholera victims and the victims from the ongoing political unrest. All this causes the entire country to suffer from disaster fatigue, and so much of it from natural causes. It is not fair and very trying on us all—both for those of us who live in Haiti and those of us who work to support the health of the country. In reflecting on 2010 and living this every single day, it is hard to fathom what we all experienced in the daily struggle of this country and its people to survive. But it never ceases to amaze me that the strength of the people continues to grow. This has made us even more passionate today about our program for disease elimination than we were on January 11.

Out of the rubble comes a phoenix and together we are charging on. Along with our partners and in support of the Haitian Ministry, we are poised to tackle the largest challenge in Haiti: Mass Drug Administration (MDA) in Port-au-Prince (see page 4). Please continue to pray with and for us as the program takes on this challenge that will be the last step to national MDA coverage in Haiti.

Thank you,
Fr. Tom

Rebuild Leogane Conference… Unified Vision and Renewed Hope

Since January 12, 2010, Haiti has been trying to catch its breath while recovering from one of the worst natural disasters in history, the 7.3-magnitude earthquake which destroyed entire cities and devastated much of the country. Now, a little over a year later, the task of rebuilding the ravaged country is more critical than ever.

From March 15-18, a group of inspired individuals met in Leogane, Haiti at the Residence Filariose, (the Notre Dame Residence Research Facility), to evaluate the needs of the city and support the people in an effort to rebuild Leogane.

The idea for this meeting came about after the earthquake, when many of our program supporters from the United States and in Haiti contacted the Notre Dame Haiti Program (NDHP), wanting to know how they could help. This
conference was a result of that out-pouring of compassion and concern.

Since 1993, Notre Dame’s primary mission in Haiti has been to eradicate the tropical disease lymphatic filariasis. However, Leogane, home of the NDHP, was perhaps the hardest hit area of the entire island. With close to 87% of its buildings damaged or collapsed, thousands were left homeless and injured. Sarah Craig, Program Manager for the NDHP since 2003, describes this new rebuild effort as an extension of that original mission. “We felt we had a moral obligation to take action. After the earthquake we wanted to focus on the people in Leogane who needed us, (our) employees and those with LF, which was, and still is, our primary concern. With all our contacts and resources that Fr. Tom Streit has developed over the years, Notre Dame felt it was in a unique position to contribute to this rebuild.”

There were over 200 attendees. Notre Dame parent Chip Wirth of Virginia based Wirth Construction and business advisor to the NDHP, along with Bill DeJong, cofounder of Schools for the Children of the World, were instrumental in helping organize the event and bringing together all the delegates. In addition to the official participants, Mayor Santos, magistrate for the commune of Leogane, addressed the group and approximately 175 Haitian citizens attended the conference as well.

Rev. Bob Loughery, C.S.C., coordinator of the Notre Dame Haiti Program rebuild effort, believes a key component to the success of this effort is including the citizens of Leogane in the planning and decision making process to rebuild the city. “Haitians are very resourceful people. If people come in and fix a problem and then leave, there is no pride of ownership for them. We need to listen to their vision. During the conference, each time we asked for their thoughts, they responded “Thank you. Thank you for listening.””

The Mission

Our goal was to establish open communication with all the different groups working in Leogane. Often, they have their own plans and are usually not in unison with each other. Our goal was to develop a unified vision for a culturally sensitive master plan to rebuild Leogane in support of the existing Haitian leadership. The conference participants worked hard to identify the most important areas of the redevelopment process for Leogane: health, education, planning and zoning, infrastructure, culture, economic development, housing, public services and governance. They then broke into smaller focus groups to address the challenges, resources and associated recommendations for each of the key areas.

Notre Dame Associate Professor in Civil Engineering, Tracy Kijewski-Correa led the team focused on housing needs. Kijewski-Correa has been involved with the rebuild efforts for Haiti since she visited Leogane in March of 2010 right after the earthquake to assess possible damage to the NDHP compound and the community. Her vision is to develop a plan for “culturally-appropriate, long-term rebuilding of Haiti housing stock that is sustainable on locally available materials and construction practices and is resilient to both earthquakes and hurricanes.” This vision and that of the many other academic experts from such places as University of Illinois and University of Florida is key to our collective success.
Our goal was to establish open communication with all the different groups working their own plans in Haiti and to develop a unified vision for a culturally sensitive master plan to rebuild Leogane.

The Master Plan

Quinn Lammie, consultant for the Rebuild Leogane Conference, who will be attending Rice University this fall for his Masters in Architecture, compiled the report on the findings of the conference. One key finding was that Leogane has a strong sense of cultural history and identity that should be a major consideration as plans to rebuild Leogane move forward. “This unique identity will also be important in developing Leogane as a brand,” says Craig in reflecting on the positive themes going forward. The results of the four day workshop will act as a framework to develop a unified plan for Leogane. Lammie commented, “One of the largest problems facing the redevelopment of Leogane is the abundance of different groups working on their own individual planning efforts. The conference was a way to get some of these groups on the same page and the hope is that this document will become the basis for a single unified planning effort.”

Since this conference there have been many follow-up meetings in Haiti with the different groups currently working on plans in Leogane. While planning and rebuild efforts continue, Haitian officials and Leogane citizens are leading the way with some foreign allies closely involved. Together we are taking an active role in trying to shape the future of the city.

RARAS CENTRAL TO LÉOGÂNE’S VIBRANT CULTURE

Colorful, vibrant, rhythmic, stimulating, boisterous, wow! These are just some of the words used by conference participants to describe the Rara bands as they processed through the streets of the countryside well into the early morning hours. Each weekend through Lent, from Mardi Gras to Easter, the Rara bands, with multi-layered religious roots, move through villages and towns, playing their distinctive brand of music. Much like Carnival and Mardi Gras, hundreds, sometimes thousands of people fill the streets, dancing and singing, often dressed in colorful costumes. Their weekly performances culminate in an all encompassing annual cultural celebration that explodes in Leogane every year at Easter.

Because the Rara is such a vibrant key to Leogane’s culture, it will be a major consideration as plans are drawn up to redevelop the city. For example, Leogane could use wider streets to accommodate the 37+ bands as they march into the city, and better designed public gathering spaces with Rara events in mind. As the city gets back on its feet, there is the potential for great economic boost, as throngs of people from around the world pour into Leogane to experience the event.
Meet Ryan Hemme, NDHP Scientist

Over the years, the Notre Dame Haiti Program has been blessed with many dedicated scientists and currently, Ryan Hemme is one of them.

Ryan, originally from Hardwick, MN, is a vector biologist and has been working with mosquito transmitted diseases since 2003. Since receiving his Masters in Public Health at the University of Minnesota, he has been studying different aspects of surveillance and has continued working with mosquitoes and the molecular basis of dengue transmission with Dr. Dave Severson at Notre Dame. He is currently doing his post-doctoral studies under Fr. Tom Streit, founder of the NDHP and in cooperation with Patrick Lammie, Ph.D. with the U.S. Center for Disease Control.

So far the most rewarding aspect of Ryan’s one-year commitment to the Haiti Program has been working with his colleagues in Haiti. “We have a great team in Leogane, with the capabilities to continue conducting first rate research. The people of Haiti are great. They have a very strong will and are optimistic about their country. Interacting with the Haitians is always a highlight of my day. Now all I need to do is improve my Creole.”

“Hope is like the sun, which, as we journey toward it, casts the shadow of our burden behind us.”

Samuel Smiles, 19th century Scottish physician and author