

Helping quake victims in Haiti eases students' feelings of helplessness

Students of Haitian descent convince classmates to rally to the cause

BY J.D. GRAVENOR, THE GAZETTE FEBRUARY 8, 2010



John F. Kennedy High School students Rody Pierre-René (from left), Shamie Lorzema, Sabrina St-vil and Samuel Jean helped raised \$1,702.26 for Haitian relief at their high school.

Photograph by: Dario Ayala, The Gazette

As far as earthquakes go, it was over in a matter of seconds.

But with 200,000 people dead, another 300,000 injured, and years of rebuilding in store, the catastrophe that struck Haiti on Jan. 12 is far from over.

Around the world, onlookers felt helpless as Haitians buried their loved ones, dug friends and neighbours out of collapsed buildings and struggled for survival amid shortages of food, water, shelter and medical care. But others, including youngsters of Haitian descent at Montreal high schools, were not content to merely stand by.

Instead, students like Shamie Lorzema, who is in Grade 11 at John F. Kennedy High School, did what they could to raise money for earthquake relief. And it wasn't easy. After all, her family was directly affected by the deadly earthquake.

"We have family down there, and we couldn't get in contact with them," said the 17-year-old. "We didn't know if they were alive or if they were alive and suffering.

"It's already a poor country, and just seeing the fact that it got worse, it killed me, because

so many people were affected. Everybody was sleeping in the streets and nobody was able to stay in their house.”

Indeed untold thousands remain homeless as dozens of aftershocks have struck the Caribbean nation in the past month, and Haitians remain in fear that those homes that remain standing could come down on their heads at any time.

So when Lorzema learned that her school was planning a student-led fundraiser, she pitched in.

“It’s not my birth country, but I’m Haitian. I felt I had to do something,” she said.

She joined her school’s fundraising effort.

In less than a week, JFK had organized a three-day relief collection. Between Jan. 18 and 20, students of all backgrounds and staff collected the funds in support of the people of Haiti. Donation tables were set up in common areas at lunchtimes where students and staff – some of them of Haitian descent – also raised awareness of Haiti, and students visited classrooms to drum up dollars. More cash was collected for a special dress-down day. The three-day effort ended with a non-denominational prayer and moment of silence in solidarity with the people of Haiti.

At the end of the three days, the students and staff raised \$1,702.26 to help feed, clothe, house and care for the people of Haiti.

Principal Joseph Marra said how the fundraising effort made him feel: “Extremely proud. We have 650 children. We’re an inner-city school. So raising that amount in three days is an accomplishment. I’m proud, not just as a principal, but for the whole J.F.K. community. We’re very proud of our students.”

To Sabrina St-vil, the success of the fundraiser was thanks to a collective effort.

“When the whole community helps out, you’re capable of fixing one problem,” said the 16-year-old. “When people put all their money together, it’s better, instead of just doing individual things.”

St-vil has relatives in Haiti. Tragically, her mother lost a sister in the aftermath of the quake.

But after helping raise money, the Grade 11 student was impressed by the generosity of

the donors.

“A lot of people gave a lot of money,” she said. “And I was really happy and I appreciated it, because they didn’t have to give money.”

Sixteen-year-old Roody Pierre-René also has Haitian roots.

“My dad couldn’t reach his mom. And my mom couldn’t reach her mom and her family,” he said. “My dad was nervous and my mom didn’t really sleep. I was nervous, too, because I was wondering if they were alive or not.”

Pierre-René’s family were eventually able to contact some, but not all of their relatives. So helping raise funds was the least this Grade 10 student could do.

“I went to my classes to collect money,” he said. “They were really generous. They gave more than what I expected.”

Fifteen-year-old Samuel Jean has relatives in Haiti, including a grandfather on his father’s side. His father also has cousins. His mother, meanwhile, has an adopted daughter, cousins and many friends there, too. His father’s father is all right, but his mother had been unable to reach her daughter.

“And I think someone in my family died, but my mother didn’t tell me much about it,” said Jean.

Doing nothing was not an option, so he helped out during lunchtimes, at a donation table that featured a multimedia presentation of Haiti. He also visited students in class.

“A lot of my friends asked if they could help,” he said. “A lot of people asked to donate. We went to classes and we got money from there. We asked for two (dollars) and they gave, like, 10. It was just amazing.”

And the donors included not just students, but also teachers, school staff and administration.

One day, Jean hopes to visit Haiti and, if possible, help out with reconstruction. But doing what he can in Montreal also gives him a good feeling.

“It feels great to help,” he said. “There’s the feeling of helping one another that makes it the best feeling ever.”

“Just like our flag (of Haiti) says, ‘union fait la force’ (strength in unity).”

Jean knows that it will take a long time for Haiti to turn the corner and rebuild.

“But I’m sure in the future it’s going to be better,” he said.

Still, as St-vil says, “It will take a lot of time.”

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