

## Community-Minded Youth

### **FreddyLink travelled to Haiti in March so local youth could interact with their Haitian counterparts**

*By Lori Gallagher*

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Earlier this month, young leaders from Fredericton had the life-changing opportunity to spend time with their counterparts in Haiti.

They made the trip from March 3 to 10 as part of a team of 20 from Freddy-Link, a local group that links individuals in Fredericton with children and families in need in villages in the Cobocol and UDICC area development programs in the central plateau region of Haiti through World Vision.

This is the fourth time FreddyLink has taken a group to Haiti and organizers say this one was a couple years in the making. The spark for this trip was ignited during the group's last visit in 2013, when Heidi Billington stood in the newly built Centre of Hope.

"This trip is basically the unfolding of that moment," says Bernie Zebarth, the Freddy Link project co-ordinator.

"I just came home with this urgency that we needed to have our own young people be as articulate and take as much ownership in the leadership of their community," says Billington, the family ministries director and the team leader of the most recent trip. "It birthed something called Camp Lead, which is a week in the summer."

Beginning in the summer of 2013, the Camp Lead group at Smythe Street Cathedral did a variety of things, from helping out at the food bank to visiting TreeGO to using public transit, all to help youth develop different skills.

When the week was over, two of the kids asked Billington to not make them wait until the next summer before she gave them the chance to lead again. That motivated her to begin a monthly boot camp.

"Once a month on Sundays in the afternoon, we have boot camp and do a variety of things," she says.

For example, the kids created the church Christmas play that year, have had motivational speakers come in, visited the pediatrics ward at the hospital and are planning to visit a seniors' home in May.

On top of the need to do something with Fredericton youth, while standing in the Centre of Hope in Haiti, Billington says she knew that centre was something she could work with.

"In my own history, I've worked on a native reserve and in Newfoundland doing kids' programming throughout my youth," She says. "Though I've never done it in a foreign country, I was motivated by, 'What If?' Our whole motivation (at Smythe Street Cathedral) is to partner with parents to raise their children up as young leaders in the church and in the community."

After returning from Haiti in the spring of 2013, they pitched the idea of doing a vacation Bible study type of visit to Haiti connecting young leaders to World Vision. Organizers kept moving in that direction, finally getting an official go-ahead in September 2014. They assembled their team, including young leaders ranging in age from seven to 22, and began fundraising.

Maxwell Goodine, who is about to turn 13, and his father Ron Goodine were part of the team.

"My dad came to me and said, 'I think this trip is going to change how we think about the world,'" says Max. "At first I didn't really agree."

But as the trip got closer, he says, he realized more and more that his dad was right.

"I just really wanted to have the experience to see what a third world country is really like, to see the difference from Fredericton," he says. "I wanted to see life in the trenches."

Though he had a general idea of what to expect, Max says the reality was quite different.

"For me, it was the contrasts, rich and poor. That was shocking," he says.

The group arrived in Port-au-Prince then travelled to Hinche where the team from Fredericton met the children they sponsored through FreddyLink and the young leaders from Canada and Haiti teamed up to do a vacation Bible school.

"It was fun. They were so welcoming, with open arms, which just blew me off my feet," says Max. "We learned about God, we kind of did our Sunday school every day. We kind of took Smythe Street and we brought it to Haiti."

The concept was that the young leaders from Fredericton would be matched with young leaders from Haiti, and they would do the programming together, says Billington. Originally, there were 40 Haitians registered to take part, but it turned out to be a lot more than that.

"Although the exchange didn't happen exactly the way we had planned," she says, there was still a wonderful exchange of leadership over the three days.

The adults in the group also had some great experiences, including a visit with the mothers' group and getting to see the goats

that Frederictonians fundraised to buy for the area.

Billington and the others admit they are still processing the trip, which took them back to Port-au-Prince for a couple days before they came home.

"I always find a trip to Haiti looks different than was intended on paper, and I knew that going in," says Billington. "Let's follow this through and see what it means for the kids and for the parents."

She knows the value is there and expects it will continue to reveal itself over time.

"It was an astounding success," says Zebarth. "The whole point is to develop relationship."

And that's what they did, with the young leaders from Canada and the young leaders from Haiti interacting and running programs, he says.

"It was all we had hoped," he says. "The exposure for people like Max was outstanding."

It opened the eyes of the members of the Fredericton team to a completely different environment.

"They hear about it, but it's something else to see it," says Zebarth. "They see it, they live it, they breath it. It's just different."

Max says he returned home with a much better sense of how blessed we are.

"We walk five steps and I can get fresh water from a faucet," he says. "There it was one kilometre."

And that was after a well was dug in the community. Prior to that, people had to go much further for something we have easy access to.

"We debriefed at my house this week and one of the kids, he's 11, said, 'I went to school on Monday a little happier to go because I realized that education is so important to my Haitian friends,'" says Billington.

Ron Goodine says that in his walk with God, he often sees himself in a support role, always there to help others and happy to do what he can. That was the role he planned to play on this trip as well.

"On a personal note, I got a secondary benefit. It really charged me up internally. My faith for me as a Christian, I got filled up way more than I thought I ever would," he says.

He sits on the board at Smythe Street Cathedral, has gotten updates about Haiti and the Freddy Link project over the years, but having the chance to experience it first hand was eye-opening.

"It's changed me," says Goodine. "I'm still working through a lot of it."

Billington notes that Haiti has been a part of the story at Smythe Street Cathedral since FreddyLink began.

"For these kids who went, they walked through it in their way over the last five years, too. It's neat for them to actually make those connections," she says. "And neat for me to share Haiti with all these people that I love."

One of the people she got to share it with was her seven-year-old daughter Zoë Billington, who was the youngest member of the team.

A highlight of the FreddyLink trip is the chance for participants to meet their sponsor children. This time around, more than just meeting them, says Billington, the children were around all three days that the young leaders were working together.

The Goodines met eight-year-old Ysemna, who spoke pure Creole, not French or English, which made communicating a challenge. They were still able to connect and have special moments with her, like when the little girl sat with Ron Goodine to watch the other children play a game of soccer.

"I had crackers and I gave her a bottle of water and we sat there and had a picnic.

And then she starts singing, and she starts kicking her feet," he says.

They visited again and again over the next few days.

"It really hit home, the connection - and really with no words being spoken," says Goodine.

"She had this really great smile, and she was always so happy," says Max.

Billington says it was neat to be able to see her sponsor child again, this time with her daughter.

"She shot up so much in the last two years. I couldn't believe how healthy she was," says Billington of Michaela, nine.

"And she took to Zoë... Michaela lead her around. It was so neat to see them forge that interaction."

She adds, "Zoë had a bookbag of little toys and dolls and crafts that she had brought, and they would hide under the table and play together. It was so neat to see them just naturally doing those things outside of the programming we had."

To learn more about Freddy Link and future plans, including the March 2016 Business and FreddyLink Volunteer Exposure Trip, visit [freddylink.com](http://freddylink.com).



Matt Hanson and his 14-year-old daughter Emma Hanson travelled to Haiti with FreddyLink, where the highlight of their trip was the opportunity to meet with their sponsored child Jovanika.  
PHOTO: Submitted by FreddyLink Team