

Making a Connection

By Lori Gallagher

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Like many refrigerators around the city, mine is covered with photos.

Most are of my nieces, nephews and other relatives, or my friends' offspring, but two are of children I never expected to meet.

Marvin is 10 years old and lives in Africa. I sponsor him through Watoto Canada. Johny is nine years old and lives in Haiti. I started sponsoring him last year through World Vision.

Johny lives in one of the villages that make up the Cobocol Area Development Program, which is part of a pilot project between FreddyLink and World Vision.

It links up people in Fredericton with children and families in need in that area of Haiti.

When I was invited to travel to Haiti with FreddyLink and see what World Vision is doing there, I was told I might have the chance to meet Johny. How could I say no?

Before our trip in mid-March, I stocked up on small gifts I thought a nine-year-old boy would like.

A week or so before we left, however, I received a call from our contact at World Vision Canada. Mark Miller had bad news for me. World Vision Haiti had been in touch to tell him that Johny had had an accident at school and hurt his right eye. Sadly, he got an infection and ended up losing the eye. I was heartbroken for him.

Our meeting was up in the air, as we weren't sure how Johny would be feeling. And if I did get to see him, Mark wanted me to be prepared.

I didn't know what would happen on Saturday, March 16, when we travelled to the Cobocol ADP for the sponsored children's party. That day, the 300 children sponsored through FreddyLink were there,

dressed in their best outfits, sitting in the shade and patiently awaiting our arrival.

As we drove in, Brad Woodside, the mayor of Fredericton, said to me, "*This is FreddyLink.*"

I couldn't have agreed more.

The plan was for individual members of our group to meet their sponsored children two at a time, so one of our two interpreters could work with each. As Haitians speak creole, our interpreters often came in handy.

I was second to last on this list and by this point I knew Johny was there. Suddenly fear of not getting to meet him was replaced by fear of not knowing what to say to him.

When he came in, accompanied by his mother, I asked him a lot of questions, all patiently translated by the interpreter, Guy Vital-Herne. It was Johny's mother who mentioned the accident. I'd like to point out that to this point, I had held it together really well. But when this mother said, via Guy, "Please don't forget about my son now that he's hurt," I started to cry. The fact that this family worried for even a moment that his accident would cause me to stop sponsoring this sweet boy was too much.

The rest of our visit was good. I gave him his gifts and every time I saw him for the rest of the day he was clutching the stuffed dog I brought him.

For the six of us from Fredericton who travelled to Haiti and got to meet our sponsored children, it was an amazing, emotional, incredibly special experience.

It made real the facts I had about Johny from World Vision. He's no longer just a photo on my fridge. He's a living, breathing little boy who loves basketball and writing, who lost his eye in an accident, who wants

to be a farmer when he grows up, who has a brother and a sister and parents who want the best for him.

And he's got me, his friend in Canada, who wants the best for him as well.

To learn more about FreddyLink and what's happening with the Fredericton-Haiti Community Development Partnership, visit freddylink.com or email Bernie Zearth, the project co-ordinator, at info@FreddyLink.com



Poignant meeting: Lori Gallagher speaks with Johny, her sponsored child, and his mother in Cobobol, Haiti, with the help of interpreter Guy Vital-Heme.