

## **Making a difference**

*By Lori Gallagher*

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***FreddyLink has teamed up with World Vision to link individuals in Fredericton with children and families in need in Haitian villages.***

Three hundred children in Cobocol in the Central Plateau of Haiti are supported by approximately 250 individuals, families, businesses and schools in Fredericton.

Like many, I wondered if it's making a difference. In March, I travelled to Haiti with FreddyLink to find out.

Joining me on this adventure were Bernie Zebarth, FreddyLink project Coordinator, FreddyLink volunteers Heidi Billington, Lori Haggerty and Anne-Marie Hood, realtor Pam Doak, Mayor Brad Woodside and three representatives from World Vision Canada, Janet Johnson, Mark Miller and Jason Moffat.

FreddyLink is a pilot project through World Vision that links individuals in Fredericton with children and families in need in villages in the Cobocol Area Development Program. This is a 15-year project that is currently in its 10th year.

I'd never been to Haiti, so wasn't sure what to expect when we landed in Port-au-Prince on March 12. I'd seen the photos of the devastation following the earthquake that hit the capital city and surrounding areas on Jan. 12, 2010, but photos didn't prepare me for the reality that the country is still dealing with three years later.

As Paul-Emile Cesar, the executive associate to the national director of World Vision Haiti explained, the problems in Haiti didn't begin with the earthquake.

"We had issues like lack of a good education system, lack of infrastructure, lack of basic services such as health and water to the general population, those things were already issues before the earthquake," he says.

"Then you realize the issues we became faced with after the earthquake were astronomical. They're not just about fixing something that was already working. It's starting from scratch in most cases."

For someone who has never been there before, it's hard to see the positive changes. Luckily for us, Zebarth and Billington were making their third visit. They were first in Haiti when the earthquake hit, then went back a year later.

"In Port-au-Prince itself, the big thing I noticed was the tent cities were gone," says Zebarth. "They were everywhere. Pretty much any open space was full of tents, including the airport and around the runways, it was all tents."

Even two years ago, there were still hundreds of thousands of people living in tents, he says. On this trip, he noticed the occasional tent, but the majority are gone.

Also gone is the rubble that used to be everywhere, he says. He also saw a dramatic improvement in the roads.



**Desire to learn:** These are some of the children at École Nationale de Caite in Haiti.

### *FreddyLink helping establish next generation of leaders in Haiti*

"The other thing that struck me in going through Port-au-Prince is some stuff was new now, whereas last time they were just recovering, so people were making due," says Zebarth.

"Now there are signs on some of the buildings and you get that sense of them picking themselves up and moving on, which was very positive,"

After meeting with World Vision Haiti on March 13, we made the drive to Hinche in the Central Plateau. It would be out base until we returned to Port-Au-Prince on March 18.

While there we visited goat projects, tree nurseries, education projects, met with local officials and toured the soon-to-open Centre of Hope.

We heard, saw and experienced too much to share it all. My favourite part - aside from meeting the children sponsored

through FreddyLink and their families - was when we heard the individual stories.

For example, while visiting the Cobocol Area Development Program, I had the opportunity to interview Chlenive Anèas. She grew up in Colladere, one of the villages in the Cobocol area, and was sponsored through World Vision.

"They paid for her school fees and also they gave her books to study and also they paid for her uniforms," explained Ingrid François, who acted as the Interpreter for the interview.

Anèas says she might have been able to attend school without sponsorship, but not in this way.

"She had everything to have a stronger education," explains François.

Anèas has been studying medicine for three years at a private university, Université

Lumière, in Port-au-Prince and has four more years to go.

She says she wanted to study medicine because "in the community they have a lot of health issues and most of the time when people are sick they have to go to Hinche."

When she's finished school, she plans to return to Cobocol to work in the clinic that's been set up in the ADP.

"For now she would be working in the health clinic, but in the future they will be building a hospital and she would probably be working there," says François.

Being a sponsored child meant more to Anèas than an education, however. She knew there were people who were thinking of her."

Sponsorship ends at 18 and Anèas is now 22, but she still has the letters she received from her World Vision sponsor family. If she could send them a message, she says she would thank them because she's in medical school now because of them, and because of World Vision.

This is one example from a week filled with stories of the difference that is being made.

"I think when you can make a difference in the life of one person, only one person, it matters." says Cesar.

Personal relationships are being built between the children of Cobocol and the people of Fredericton, he says.

"Those children will grow up having that as part of their childhood. The way you talk to them, the way you give of yourself to

help them further their education, they'll remember that and it will make a difference in their lives," he says.

Zebarth says on this trip he realized that these 15-year projects make a generational change.

"Before we started, we talked to Willard Metzger of World Vision and he told us before World Vision, even though it's an agricultural area, they would have one meal a day."

There were families that would have to decide who would eat that day, says Zebarth. That was the starting point of this program.

"They've eliminated malnutrition ... and not just the physical effects, but the mental effects, such as learning disabilities and increased susceptibility to disease," he says.

The next step is the health and education, which helps the children develop self-confidence and life skills.

"Basically, what they've done is they've created the next generation of leaders" says Zebarth.

"The only way you can change a community is on a generational scale and this is what they're doing. They're taking an entire generation and lifting them up."

Yes, Haiti has a long way to go. There is poverty, high unemployment, limited access to clean water, a lack of infrastructure. But there is also hope and a desire to create a better future - and when you have that, anything is possible.



**Champion skippers:** Children show their skipping skills during the sponsor party hosted by FreddyLink at the Cobocol Area Development Program. The event brought together the 300 children sponsored by Frederictonians.