

## Sponsors for Haitian kids sought

*By Adam Bowie*

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If you've ever considered sponsoring a child in Haiti, Bernie Zearth has some stories he'd like to share with you.

Zearth is the project co-ordinator of Freddy Link's Fredericton-Haiti Community Development Partnership. The program helps establish connections between local citizens and the residents of a Haitian community named Cobocol in collaboration with World Vision.

The local advocacy group will host an information session at the Charlotte Street Arts Centre tonight, giving Zearth and several volunteers the chance to share stories from a recent trip to Haiti and to explain the impact child sponsorships are having on the devastated Caribbean country's youths.

They'll have Haitian food and music on hand for the free session and they'll also set up a live video conversation with guest speaker Morose Evenel, who will speak on behalf of World Vision Haiti.

Zearth was one of three local Freddy Link volunteers who travelled to Haiti in January 2010 to visit several development programs in Cobocol.

But the catastrophic earthquake that levelled much of the country's infrastructure, homes, schools, hospitals and businesses happened two hours after they landed, effectively cancelling the group's plans. The volunteers were evacuated two days later.

It wasn't until Feb. 22 that capital region residents Zearth, Heidi Billington, and Laura Chatterton were able to return with the rest of the team.

This week's event, dubbed Hope For Haiti, will give the volunteers an opportunity to share their experiences with residents who are sponsoring children in

Cobocol and to people who are thinking about it.

"Our goal really is to sort of engage the people of Fredericton by having them sponsor children," he said.

"We're up to 58 confirmed sponsorships (from the region). When we went down we actually took gifts from the sponsors to the children. We each had an envelope that we were able to hand directly to the kids, took pictures of them and everything. It's basically to build a relationship."

Zearth said participants will also receive an update on the work being done with three development programs co-ordinated by World Vision in the Central Plateau region. The projects have unfolded over a 12-15 year period and help Haitian residents establish resources that will improve their health, the quality of their water and sanitation systems, expand educational opportunities and improve their economy.

"A couple of things really impressed me. We were looking to see whether these programs are really effective. We saw lots of evidence of that," he said.

"You could see it in the faces of these children. You could see their joy."

He said the ultimate goal is to create a continuous relationship between local citizens and Haitians.

Hope For Haiti takes place tonight at the Charlotte Street Arts Centre between 6:30-8:30 p.m. People can RSVP by calling 458-8206 ext. 21 so the organizers can prepare enough food.