

## Your monthly coffee budget can change a life; Haiti | FreddyLink partners people in Fredericton with needs in town of Cobocol

By Molly Cormier\*

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Three hours after Bernie Zearth arrived in Haiti for his first aid trip with World Vision, the earthquake struck.

Now over a year later, Zearth serves as project coordinator of FreddyLink, an organization linking Fredericton to a community in Haiti and encouraging child sponsorships through World Vision.

Zearth recently spoke to reporter Molly Cormier about the reason the group had chosen Haiti as the focus of their work before the earthquake struck, how Frederictonians can help, and his personal memories of the country.

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*Q: What is FreddyLink?*

A: FreddyLink is a community-to-community partnership. We're partnering people in Fredericton with a community in the central plateau of Haiti, and the partnership is through World Vision Canada.

It started with a small group of us who started thinking, what can we do to make a difference outside of Canada, in an area of need? We chose Haiti because it's the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere.

We were thinking what we could do as an individual, but you can do so much more as a community, which is the sum of the individuals. So the idea was to engage the community of Fredericton with a community in Haiti.

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*Q: So you chose Haiti before the earthquake hit?*

A: We had the concept before. We had come up with the idea, we identified World Vision as the organization to do this with. We had just been travelling down to Haiti, two people from Fredericton, one from Chipman, and a couple from World Vision; and we arrived three hours before the earthquake.

We were just on our way to visit the community for the first time.

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*Q: Tell me about that experience.*

A: We'd arrived three hours before the earthquake and went up to this hotel where we were staying. We were in this beautiful dining room with a high ceiling and had a meal, then we had a couple hours free and then we were supposed to go back to the same room for supper and an orientation meeting.

It was during that spare time that the earthquake hit, and the roof in the dining room collapsed. If the timing had been shifted, we would not have survived.

I was in my room when it hit and it takes a while for your brain to register

what's going on. The whole room started shaking, the mirror came off the wall, broken glass everywhere. Then there was kind of a pause, then it really hit hard.

The television went bouncing across the floor and there was a great big crack down one of the walls in my room. It was quite dramatic.

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*Q: Were you able to get out of the country?*

A: We got evacuated about 48 hours later by World Vision. They drove us to Dominican Republic and took us out from there. We were travelling in their care, and they had other operations but they kind of felt responsible for us. They wanted to get us out of the way, so to speak.

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*Q: Just backtracking a little, you said you were in a small group of people who decided to come together and help out a cause. Was that a group of friends? How did you get involved?*

A: It actually started with a few of us who knew each other from our church, Smythe Street Cathedral, but the organization is not with our church - it really is a Fredericton thing. We want to try and engage as many people as we can through different events.

We had an event for the one year anniversary of the earthquake in January, and we have another event coming up May 12. It's a public event for the community.

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*Q: Tell me about the event you're currently working on.*

A: It's May 12, a Thursday night, starting at 6:30 at the Charlotte Street Arts Centre. We call it the Hope for Haiti event.

Mayor Woodside will be speaking. Heidi Billington and I will be talking about our recent trip down to Haiti in February.

We will have a Skype connection to someone on site, and they can do a question and answer with the audience.

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*Q: I think it's interesting you identified Haiti as your focus even before the earthquake. Why did you make that decision?*

A: If you go way back to the start, before the earthquake, the reason we chose Haiti is because we invited a number of people from the community and we broached the idea of a community-to-community link.

It was actually Fredericton that suggested Haiti. There's always been a connection between Fredericton and Haiti: through the military, and other groups like Healing Hands for Haiti that have the same connection.

That's how we chose Haiti, because there's such a great need.

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*Q: So you were able to take another trip to Haiti?*

A: Yes, just recently at the end of February.

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*Q: How was your trip?*

A: It was great. This time we did make it to the central plateau. We visited three different area development projects. Cobocol is the community that Fredericton partners with under FreddyLink. All three

projects are at three different stages in their cycle.

World Vision identifies the location, and then spends two or three years working with the community establishing a community structure. Until we went, we didn't realize the significance of this.

Here, we have municipal governments and all kinds of organizations, but they don't have that. They don't have a way of making decisions as a community. The structure gives people in the community a voice.

They develop their own plan, specific to their own needs, and then as much as possible they do their own plan, with World Vision providing some resources.

Toward the end, World Vision pulls out and the goal is after 15 years the community is self-sufficient.

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*Q: What are your goals as an organization?*

A: What we're doing is promoting community-to-community connection, which is all through World Vision child sponsorships. Our initial goal was to have 50 children sponsors. We've passed that and we're hoping to hit 100 in Fredericton in the next year.

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*Q: What would you like people to know about Haiti?*

A: I guess a couple things. One is that for very little money, they can make a huge difference. The cost of sponsoring a child is \$40 a month.

It works out to less than the price of a coffee a day.

For us, we have some people who have financial difficulty, but for most of us, a coffee is not really something we worry

about it. And yet for that, you can change lives.

Children can get an education, health care, improve agricultural production - it's amazing what a small amount of money like that can do in a country like Haiti.

Another thing I noticed - before I went down, I was expecting it to be very difficult emotionally. I was expecting to see severe poverty, to see people who are really struggling.

In fact, what I was amazed to see was the vision they have despite having very little. They have an incredible sense of hope and vision for the children. It was really inspiring.