

HIGH HOPES FOR HAITI

From the Harrisburg area, an acclaimed physician focuses on educating the children of his native country.

BY DEBORAH LYNCH

A young mother bought bags full of rice that she dried and had milled before taking it by train to open-air markets in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, to sell each week to support her family.

It meant spending nights under a tarp in the market to protect her product and avoid the rain. Every Sunday after she returned home, the family attended Catholic services, where her young son assisted the priests, hoping one day to become one.

Eventually, the industrious mother earned enough to buy a small house for her family. Her son graduated from secondary college and attended medical school, leaving his plans for service to the church for later.

With opportunity and education, Dr. Rodrigue Mortel became a gynecological oncologist. He joined the staff at Penn State Hershey Medical Center and eventually founded and led the Penn State Cancer Center, becoming an acclaimed cancer doctor. But he never forgot his childhood in Haiti or the sacrifices his mother made to give him a better life.

The key to that better life, he knew, was education. For that purpose, he started the Mortel Foundation in 1997 to raise money to build schools for the children of Haiti.

"The foundation was created to target these children and provide them with every tool that is available to us and bring it to them in order to empower them to become self-sufficient and have productive lives," Dr. Mortel said.

Today, the Mortel High Hopes For Haiti Foundation, based in downtown Harrisburg, includes board members from the Hershey, Harrisburg and Baltimore areas.

"It's been said and proven that education is the sure way out of poverty," Dr. Mortel said. "The life that I went through and what I want for these children to know—to see—is that there is hope, providing you decide to make somebody out of yourself."

Even public government-run schools in Haiti charge for books and uniforms, something impoverished families often cannot pay. These are the children the Mortel Foundation scouts the streets looking for—those running naked or with no shoes, those with reddish hair indicating malnutrition—who will have a chance at a new life by attending the Mortel Foundation's schools in his hometown of Saint-Marc.



Dr. Mortel with children from his schools in Saint-Marc, Haiti



CHANGED LIVES

The primary school, Ecole Les Bons Samaritains, opened first in 2001, followed a decade later by the secondary College James M. Stine.

Today, 3 year olds are recruited to attend the Patricia Chairs Preschool that feeds into Les Bons Samaritains. Along with educational opportunities, the children receive other sustenance necessary for their success—two meals a day, dental care, medical care and eye care.

The schools' test scores exceed those of government, religious and private schools in Haiti. Many graduates of the foundation's schools go on to university, certificate programs or to study abroad. Others find jobs locally, which is one of the main goals for the schools.

The foundation also realized the need to educate parents, so they could understand and help their children. So, it now offers adult literacy programs, English education and farming programs, including fish and poultry farming. It is considering adding vocational/technical training.

Since the schools were established, many people from both the central Pennsylvania and Baltimore areas have either donated and/or visited Haiti as

volunteers. Dr. Mortel and those who have made the trip agree that meeting the people of Haiti and seeing the appreciation for their efforts changed their lives.

Rachel Bowles, now the foundation's director of administration and operations, made her first trip to Haiti when she was 16.

"There are experiences in your life that totally shape you," she said. "Dr. Mortel would tell you he couldn't get rid of me after that trip."

Bowles has since taken groups of youth and adults to Haiti.

"Every American we took there instantly felt unconditionally the love from the students there," she said. "They just swarm you. Instantly, the students show love towards anyone we brought to visit."

Dr. Mortel's daughter, Denise Mortel Mitchell, is vice president for the foundation and has taken her own children on trips to Haiti.

"My children were amazed at how happy and satisfied these children there were—without anything," she said. "My kids couldn't get over how after looking at the conditions, the poverty, the heat, how these children could be so overjoyed and

happy with just—nothing ... the whole concept of happiness not being rooted into materialistic things."

Celebrations for the 20th anniversary continue this January with a Zoom event that offers a cooking demonstration by Mariella Amato, chef and owner of Mangia Mangia in Hershey, with Dr. Mortel cooking soup. On April 2, the foundation hopes to have a dinner dance at the Purcell Friendship Hall of Milton Hershey School.

When Dr. Mortel retired from Penn State Hershey Medical Center in 2001, he had the Mortel Foundation for his retirement project, but seeking more, he went through the rigorous training to become a Catholic deacon. Although he's now officially retired as an active deacon, he continues to participate in the activities of the church.

"Dr. M. does not retire well," Bowles said. "But we're glad for that." **B**

For more information on the Mortel High Hopes for Haiti Foundation, visit www.highbopesforhaiti.org. Dr. Mortel also has written a book, "Go, And Do The Same: Schooling a New Generation for Haiti."

Photos courtesy of Mortel High Hopes for Haiti Foundation