

# Pictures helping the poor

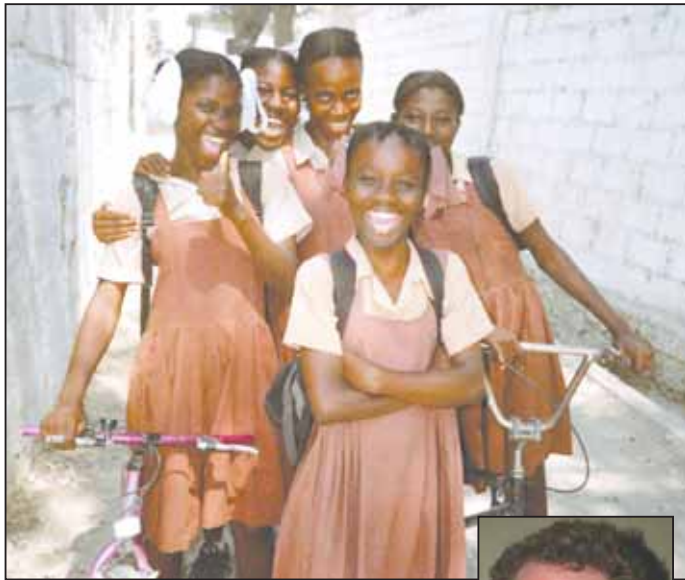
Almonte photographer shares passion for art with Haitian youth

By LAURIE McVICAR  
Staff Writer

While many Canadians flee the winter weather for a luxurious vacation at a posh exotic resort, Jeff Mills is preparing to spend his in poverty-ravaged Haiti ... and he's just as excited to go.

This will be the second time in two years that the Almonte photographer has visited the country, planting a seed of hope among youth there simply by sharing his passion for art.

"I have a friend, Dieudonne Batraville, who owns a house in Almonte, but spends most of her time in Haiti. She was born in Saint Marc and, as a young person, was befriended by a German couple who helped her get an education. She now has a degree in international studies and a Masters in Social Work in Haiti, she has helped with the building of some schools, medical centres, community development workshops with youth where they interview older people and create plays," said Mills. "I signed on for a two week awareness trip (in March 2006), where I was going to help with the building of a road in the mountains (with the



The picture above is one of many taken as the result of a photography workshop for Haitian youth, offered in March 2006 by Jeff Mills (inset). Mills handed out disposable cameras to the teens and offered basic instruction as to how to use them. The Almonte resident has over 20 years experience as a photographer.

Submitted photos

Rayjon Sharecare began feeling as though he Agency). Two weeks before he was due to leave Canada, Mills' could offer more to Haitians than just manual labour.

"I happened to see the award winning film, 'Born into Brothels'. It a documentary about a photogra-

pher from New York who traveled to Calcutta with the purpose of filming prostitutes. When she got there, she found that the families lived with the prostitutes in the brothels. She quickly befriended these kids, who were fascinated by her camera and started a small photography club. It just blew me away. The photographs they took were very artistic."

Mills made the decision to try something similar on his trip.

"I brought some disposable, point and shoot cameras down and did two different workshops - one at St. Patrick's in Saint Marc and one at the office of the agency in Saint Marc," said Mills.

A total of 40 students, from 20 years of age down, took part.

"I really tried to give them as little instruction as possible. I didn't want to fill their head with design criteria. I taught them how to use the camera, keep their hands away from the lens, not be afraid to get close to their subject, and about turning the flash on when shooting inside," said Mills. "I told them to consider themselves the teacher and me their student. I wanted them to teach me about their lives. They are creating a photo archive of their

community at this time, which otherwise wouldn't happen if they didn't have the resources."

Mills was astounded by the enthusiasm and the commitment of the workshop participants.

"The kids are bright and driven. They just need an opportunity like Dieudonne had," said Mills. "I worked with this one boy named Aude Saintoite. His family home was in the mountains, but he lived and went to school and Saint Marc. He told his instructor that he wanted to take his camera and go back to where his family lived. He took his camera and hiked four hours to his village. The next day, he went all the way back to school and forgot to bring his camera."

"When the teacher told him that I was leaving on Thursday for Port-au-Prince and then Canada, he went back and got his camera. That blows me away, because that was just a little straw of opportunity I offered him. He didn't know me, he had just met me, but he saw it as a possible opportunity and he wasn't about to let it go."

Mills left Haiti with 24 rolls of undeveloped film and a desire to educate

See HAITI pg. 5

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## HAITI

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Canadians about the plight of the Haitian people.

"I was a little freaked because I didn't know what I would get. The x-ray machines in the United States are strong, so I was concerned I would get back with nothing," said Mills. "I couldn't believe the results. They were pretty amazing."

Many of the photographs reflect the depressing state of the country and resilience of its people.

"It's a slave nation that won its independence from France in 1804. They are extremely proud and extremely poor," said Mills. "There's very little infrastructure. If you have hydro, it's because you can afford some solar panels. There's safe water available, but you have to purchase it. There's lot of garbage and only 1.5 per cent of the forest is left, because they burn charcoal. There's high unemployment, yet everybody's working. Everyone is doing something to survive. There is no welfare. You do what you can do to put food on the table every day. Lots of people have tiny little gardens."

"Haitians are incredibly kind and gentle. The press we get from Haiti are stories of kidnappings and murders in Port-au-Prince. In a lot of the country, they are kind, proud, hard working people," Mills added.

Since last year, Mills and a select group of volunteers have worked hard to further the efforts of the young photographers from his workshops.

"Christine Birkett and I created a website called [www.rocksandtrees.ca](http://www.rocksandtrees.ca). So far, we have had hits from about 20 different countries around the world," said

Mills.

On it, is a description of the project and photos from the students.

"Ultimately, I want to sell their photographs to make money for them and their education," said Mills. "I have sold a few and I have a number of enlargements ready to go. I want to have three different exhibits - one here in Almonte, because I've received great support, one in Montreal and one in Haiti so the students can puff their chests out and see their work professionally displayed."

Mills has done his best to keep the young photographers interested by sending supplies throughout the year, including a portion of 140 disposable cameras generously donated by Canadian Tire in Carleton Place.

"I've been soliciting point and shoot, 35 mm film cameras. There are a lot of people who have gone digital. I want to keep the students going and have them own a camera," said Mills. "We're in the process of putting together a shipment, likely to send in April. We had a generous donation from Ken's shoe store in Carleton Place. The students I worked with (in March) now have a music teacher, so they are looking for donations of instruments for the class orchestra. If people have any instruments, we're taking donations of those."

Other suggested donations include: food, toiletries such as soap and shampoo, medical supplies and school supplies and donations of gently used toys.

"We'll also accept money," said Mills. "I have a small committee that is working on getting charitable status so that we can

issue tax receipts for donations. Lots of people have been very generous."

Mills admits that he has derived just as much personal satisfaction from the project as the youth who have benefitted from it.

"They recharge me. They teach me a lot about what's important," he said. "I have a slogan on my website that says 'social justice through art.' I really believe that by telling the stories, people learn about themselves and can teach others about what their realities are."

If you are interested in helping with this cause, contact Jeff Mills at 613-256-3379 or by e-mail at [info@rocksandtrees.ca](mailto:info@rocksandtrees.ca).



Submitted photo

According to Jeff Mills, the press we get from Haiti doesn't reflect the true character of the people living there. "(There) are stories of kidnappings and murders in Port-au-Prince. In a lot of the country, they are kind, proud, hard working people."



Submitted photo

Haiti is an incredibly poor nation. "There's very little infrastructure," Mills explains. "If you have hydro, it's because you can afford some solar panels. There's safe water available, but you have to purchase it. There's lot of garbage and only 1.5 per cent of the forest is left, because they burn charcoal. There's high unemployment, yet everybody's working. Everyone is doing something to survive."



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