

Developing Hope in Haiti

"Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. In some areas almost half of the children die before the age of 5 years. Of its eight million inhabitants, 50 per cent of adults are illiterate, and only 40% of school aged children are able to go to school." According to their website, this is why the CIDA-supported charity, Rayjon Share Care of Sarnia Inc., builds schools, health centres and mills, and conducts community development workshops with youth and others in the country.

In March of 2006, Jeff Mills of Pakenham traveled to Haiti as a



guest of Dieudonne Batrville, a Rayjon director, to help build a road in the mountains. Before leaving on the trip, Jeff had seen the documentary *Born into Brothels*, filmed by children in Calcutta. Inspired by the amazing things that can happen when cameras are put into the hands of youth, Jeff collected 'point-and-shoot' film cameras from friends and brought them with him to Haiti.

Using his background as a long-time photographer, he conducted two photography workshops for high-school-aged students from the Saint Marc region of Haiti. The students are engaged in community development initiatives with Dieudonne Batrville of the Rayjon Share Care Agency, and have created theatrical plays including song and dance, based on interviews with their community elders.

This was the first time these young photographers had used cameras. Their enthusiasm was overwhelming. One teenager hiked for almost 12 hours to make sure that his photos of his community would be included in the project.

When Jeff saw the stunning results, he enlisted the help of friend Christine Birkett back in Canada and mounted an exhibition of the photos on his website <www.rocksandtrees.ca>. The experiment became "The Young Haitian Documentary Photographers Group" project.

Truth Without Filters

With hope, miracles happen. These determined students have the potential to become Haiti's future documentary journalists and community leaders. The photos these students are taking have the power to change their lives and challenge the world's impression of Haiti as "hopeless." One look at the world these kids live in, photographed as they see it, can convey more emotional impact than many thousands of words written by a foreign correspondent. There are no filters being used on these images, and their truth is immediately evident.

Social Justice Through Art

Help eliminate the negative. A second group of disposable cameras was delivered by Sean Taylor on a Rayjon trip to Haiti in May, and donations are needed to cover the cost of their development. \$25 covers the cost of



one 36 exposure roll of High Definition Kodak film, its development, double prints (one set for the student and one kept here in Canada) and a digital CD for posting the photographs to the web. Please help these budding documentary photographers by donating money for film and its development and by donating your old 35mm 'point and shoot' film camera. Just contact Jeff Mills at <info@rocksandtrees.ca>, or by phone at 256-3379.

A show of the students' photographs is being planned, and all profits from this show will be given to Dieudonne to fund ongoing projects in the students' communities. In the meantime, a visit to the Photo Album of The Young Haitian Documentary Photographers Group at <www.rocksandtrees.ca/gallery2> will

feed your soul and convince you that this is a project worth your support.

On the website, Jeff thanks many people for their generous help in making The Young Haitian Photographers Group a reality. In particular, he acknowledges the support of Dieudonne Batrville and her staff — Jeff's hosts in Haiti. The work of this group in the St. Marc region of Haiti for the Rayjon Share Care Agency is truly inspirational. Dieudonne is a resident of Almonte when she is not working in Haiti. When he's not developing photos and hope, Jeff Mills is the Client Service/Volunteer Coordinator for the Almonte, Ramsay and District Home Support Program of the Mills Community Support Corporation.

— Sally Hansen