

Almonte's photo ties to haiti

The Ottawa Citizen
 Tuesday, May 22, 2007
 Page: C4
 Section: City
 Page Name: City Editorial
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 Column: Kate Heartfield
 Source: The Ottawa Citizen

At their best, small towns are supportive networks that encourage all their residents to be more generous and creative than they might be on their own. At their worst, they can be insular, parochial and petty.

There's a lot of evidence that puts Almonte into the first category. Almonte is part of the amalgamated town of Mississippi Mills, just outside the western boundary of the City of Ottawa. It has a lovely little downtown and an artistic sensibility. And it's anything but insular.

If you go to the Ironworks Pub in Almonte before June 30, you'll see photos of Haitians on the walls. Some of the photos are joyful, some are haunting, all are beautiful. The colours and composition are remarkable. They're the results of a project by an area photographer, Jeff Mills. But they're not his photos.

Mr. Mills has a friend, Dieudonne Batrville, who works for Rayjon Share Care, a Canadian agency working toward development in Haiti. Mr. Mills travelled to Haiti as a volunteer in 2006. While he was there, he handed out disposable cameras to youth. He wanted to help them document their own world.

The work of the Young Haitian Documentary Photographers Group is now for sale in Almonte, as a fundraising effort to benefit the young people who took them. The fundraising is happening through a new organization -- or "enlightenment campaign," in Mr. Mills's words -- called Focus on Development. Ms. Batrville will help put the money to use in the young photographers' neighbourhoods in Haiti.

"I'm living on five acres here in the country and it's marvellous, so I feel I want to help people who are a little less lucky," says Mr. Mills.

Lots of people get interesting, helpful notions. Mr. Mills acted on his. What's even more impressive is the way people in his community have made this their project, too. About 20 prints have sold already, at \$165 apiece. Mr. Mills says some people are buying them for their own children, to help them understand the wider world.

"It makes you think a little more about the global realities beyond the borders of our small town and our community," he says, adding that it's one of the "multiple layers" of the project. "These students can tell their story. They can create a photo archive of their country that wouldn't otherwise exist. And they can sell their own photographs here in Canada."

Many Almonte-area residents and businesses have helped Mr. Mills move from idea to reality. The local Lions Club kicked in some money, for example, and the Carleton Place Canadian Tire donated cameras.

A project like this can help the local community, too, in a village that relies on its retail and service sector. Mr. Mills says that media coverage of the exhibit has been filling tables at the Ironworks, bringing people out into Almonte's downtown.

IMAGES



Wayne Cuddington, the Ottawa Citizen Almonte photographer Jeff Mills started the photo project by handing out disposable cameras to youth while volunteering in Haiti in 2006. **(FPinfomart: Allowed, Canada.com: Allowed)**



Seraphin Wilnord This photo was taken by a member of the Young Haitian Documentary Photographers Group, through a development project that invites young Haitians to photograph their world. Their work is on display at an Almonte restaurant and is for sale. **(FPinfomart: Restricted, Canada.com: Allowed)**

"So thank you to those students, because by telling their story this way, they're helping out the economy in little old Almonte."

Some of the stories he tells are heartbreaking, such as the one about the boy who hiked for hours to retrieve the camera he'd forgotten in his village, so he could give it to Mr. Mills. Or the girl who sold her camera because she wanted a little money for food more than she wanted to take pictures. He tells me his goal is to get food into that girl's belly. "I'm going to keep doing this until that girl's photographs are up on the wall," he said at the exhibit opening.

Mr. Mills is looking for exhibit space in Montreal, the likely next stop for the show after Almonte. And Focus on Development is already thinking about future possibilities, perhaps a show by young aboriginal Canadians.

If you can't make it to Almonte, you can see and buy the prints at the website focusondevelopment.ca. But it is worth going in person, to witness the way this project seems to be such a perfect fit in this Ontario town.

Concern for the developing world sometimes gets painted as a luxury for urbanites. It's not true. There are little Canadian towns that twin with towns in poor countries, and there are worthy projects born in the strangest of places. Like the best of small towns, this project is unpretentious and practical.

"What's good for Haiti is good for Almonte and what's good for Almonte is good for Haiti," says Mr. Mills.

Kate Heartfield is a member of the Citizen's editorial board. She plans to keep track of this project on her blog: ottawacitizen.com/worldnextdoor.

Illustration:

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Idnumber: 200705220045

Edition: Final

Story Type: Column

Length: 761 words

Illustration Type: Black & White Photo

PRODUCTION FIELDS

BASNUM: 4789608

NDATE: 20070522

NUPDATE: 20070522

DOB: 20070522

POSITION: 3