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Brian McElroy

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There's Just Something about

Fondwa

Brian McElroy



U **HAITI** niversity of Fondwa's (UNIF) twenty students have come back from their semester-long internship, and they're back with a vengeance! After spending four months in their hometowns

or another rural community, they are excited to be back with their classmates. They continue to amaze me in any number of ways.

We have one house each for our ten male and ten female students, all meals are taken together, and there is one “cyber café” of three computers for all students and professors. Given these conditions, I can hardly believe how cordial the students are with each other. Don’t you remember fighting with siblings about what T.V. program to watch? It’s not paradise, but the students are determined to make the best of the opportunity they have been given.

Sure, we eat spaghetti three times a week for breakfast and no, three hours a day of electricity isn’t always enough and yes, getting water to bathe is sometimes a problem, but isn’t there a greater reason for our presence here? Things at UNIF aren’t easy, but no one ever thought creating Haiti’s first rural university would be a breeze. Making UNIF work is going to take sacrifice and determination, but it means too much to the young people of this country for it not to succeed.

If Dengue can’t stop you...

For two weeks, photographer Becca Sherman visited Haiti to document the work of the Peasant Association of Fondwa and the University. I met Becca during a human rights program last summer, and

somehow managed to convince her that I was competent enough to guide her through the Western hemisphere’s poorest country. She put together great material for Fondwa’s websites, for promotions, a documentary video, and fundraising. In fact, everything went perfectly. Until, that is, she went home and was diagnosed with the first case of Dengue fever her doctor had ever seen. Still, the day after she was told she had acquired a tropical illness during her time in Haiti, she wrote me to say that... she wants to come back! “There’s just something about Fondwa,” she said. It’s like a diamond in the rough.”

A people of courage, a place of inspiration

I take Becca’s experience as further proof that I am not crazy to enjoy living in Haiti. There is something about this country, especially the community of Fondwa that touches people’s hearts and changes the

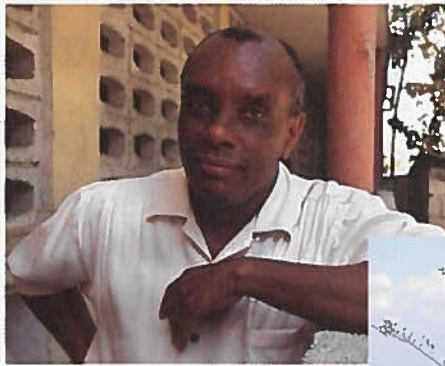
way they look at the world. For me, living in a place where people walk two to four hours to collect water and toil in their mountainous fields day after day to feed their families has been a lesson in courage and a source of inspiration. I have also found that, as much as I may stick out as a foreigner, there is a place for me in Fondwa.

Haiti’s economic and social foundation has been so devastated that the country cannot make it on its own, it requires help to meet the basic needs of its citizens. That’s not to say that any kind of help will do. Fondwa has developed a system for incorporating international aid into a model for sustainable development that accounts for the specific needs of rural Haiti. The university has had professors from the United States, France and Cuba, but the language of instruction is Haitian Creole, the native language of every Haitian. The idea is not to create dependency, but rather to promote long-lasting partnerships that are mutually beneficial. ■

Brian McElroy is a volunteer and a recent graduate of Notre Dame University.

Courtesy USA East and West Spiritan Newsletter.

Photo by Rebecca Sherman



Spiritan Joseph Philippe, founder of Fondwa and director of its university.

University of Fondwa undergraduate students.



Photo by Renate Schneider

Photo by Brian McElroy

