

BYU volunteers trying to sow hope in Haiti

By Dennis Romboy Deseret News



LEOGANE, Haiti — Four BYU students wander through a sprawling Haitian marketplace toting a plastic 10-gallon bucket, two machetes and a small shovel to check out the local produce.

They pass over the fresh mangos, healthy coconuts and just-pulled carrots spread out under tarps propped up with bamboo poles. They're scrounging for squishy plantains, crushed limes and wilted cabbage. At one point, Dominique Stay even bends down to pick up a corn cob stuck in the mud.

James Barker, who speaks Creole, asks vendors, mostly women, if they have any fruit that's bad or vegetables they can't sell. Many do but some want him to pay anyway. He declines and moves on until he finds some breadfruit peels or bean pods for nothing.

After approaching several vendors, the bucket, which is all the group has right now to haul the withered scraps, is full.

"Eventually, we'd like to get a wheelbarrow," says Ammon Franklin, a well-traveled graduate student.

The bits of waste will go into compost used to make the nutrient-poor soil in this area fit for gardening as part of a Provo-based humanitarian aid project called Sustain Haiti. It is a tiny effort in the overwhelming task of rebuilding this earthquake-ravaged nation. For now, it begins with rotten tomatoes.

The project has four primary missions: a concept known as square-foot gardening, sanitation/hygiene education, micro-financing/micro-enterprise and clean water. Volunteers will soon teach classes and hold seminars for interested residents.

Leogane, a city of 150,000 people located 18 miles west of Port-au-Prince, was at the epicenter of the Jan. 12 earthquake. An estimated 80 percent of its buildings were damaged and 20,000 to

30,000 residents were killed. House after house was rendered to chunks of cinderblock and concrete. Rubble chokes the narrow dirt streets. People still live in makeshift shelters.

In Haiti since early May, the students, all of whom attended BYU, are an advanced team of sorts, making relationships with other nonprofit humanitarian organizations as well as getting their hands dirty.

So far, they have built garden boxes from old boards anchored with cinderblocks on the LDS Church grounds and at an orphanage just outside town. When the soil is ready, the 8-foot by 10-foot plots will be planted with a variety of vegetables — a different crop in each square foot, hence the name square-foot gardening. Volunteers plan to teach seminars to locals so they can do the same on their own land.

In scope, it's like dropping a mustard seed in the Gobi Desert, but it's a start.

"Basically right now we're working on hope," said Franklin, who is coordinating the effort in Haiti and will be in the country until August. "Hope that next year we can see people planting their own gardens."

One problem is the scarcity of vegetable seeds. The nearest place to buy them is two hours away. Franklin said he would like to get a seed bank started, possibly by collecting, preserving and germinating seeds from rotten tomatoes.

Providing clean water also will take time.

One idea is to make ceramic pots lined with silver nitrate, which would act as a filtering agent. But good clay can't be found nearby. Franklin had some brought in by boat from the other end of the island, a logistically difficult and possibly expensive solution.

"If we don't have clay, we can't build pots. That's been the struggle on that front," said Franklin, who earned an undergraduate degree in French.

Teaching people how to better seize future opportunities will be a big part of the program.

Volunteers plan to hold seminars on writing résumés, job searching, interviewing and drawing up business plans. They will even hold a business competition, offering \$450 to the winning entry.

Warner Woodworth, a BYU organizational behavior professor who has experience with these types of projects in Third World nations, organized Sustain Haiti. This venture is his first to the island nation. He wants to incorporate as a nonprofit and be in the country for at least 10 years.

"We can't do everything, but we can do something," he said. "We'll see where it goes."

Woodworth intends to bring a group of nonstudents to Haiti in July. Though small in number, he hopes to leverage the project's impact with focused purposes. Although current volunteers attend BYU, the program is independent and not affiliated with the university.

Now more than four months since the 7.0 earthquake decimated Port-au-Prince and surrounding cities, the urgency to provide relief has waned. It has been a challenge to get people to commit to what has transitioned from emergency aid to redevelopment.

"It's pulling teeth to get people to want to do this," Woodworth said, noting internships and summer jobs often ace out humanitarian service.

Each of the students already in Leogane either raised or paid out of pocket \$2,000 to participate for a minimum of two weeks.

"It's been a lot of hard work," said Stay, a junior studying exercise science. "We try to pack as much as we can each day."

She says she sees her effort here as a "hand up, not a handout."

Heather Gilliland, who recently graduated in sociology, said she likes being part of a program in its infant stages. "It's a great opportunity to grow up and look at the global picture," she said.

Barker was initially called as a missionary for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to Haiti, but was redirected to Montreal when the church stopped calling non-natives to the country. He gained an affinity for Haiti after his first visit with Helping Hands for Haiti last year.

"Long term, I want to be as involved as I can be in development and humanitarian projects in Haiti," he said.

Still lacking some basic tools, the four volunteers make do with what they have.

At the Foyer Des Petits Demunis orphanage, which cracked but didn't fall in the quake, they first deliver dresses made by a Salt Lake woman to the young girls. The children promptly change into the new frocks, pose for pictures and sing in Creole "If You're Happy and You Know It."

After the frilly fun, the volunteers turn to the dirty work, which leaves them thirsty and dripping with sweat in the Haitian sun and humidity.

Gilliland and Stay dump the bucket of fruit and vegetable scraps onto the garden and hack it into smaller bits with machetes. Barker turns over the dirt with a camp shovel. Franklin pulls a bucket of brownish water from an adjacent well to mix into the pile.

"We don't see immediate results, but at the same time, we'll call it a blue-chip stock," he said. "It will pay dividends."