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HAITI...

You Won't Know Until You Go

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When I think back to my first trip to Haiti I really thought I was just going on another adventure, being the spontaneous traveler that I am. In the past, I have gone on similar trips to France, England, the Caribbean, Central America, and a 5 day trip across the country simply because someone said "hey, wanna go?"

So when a friend of mine called me one day to borrow some supplies for training in a third world country, I looked at my calendar and asked him when he would be going. What happened in the coming weeks would entirely change my life.

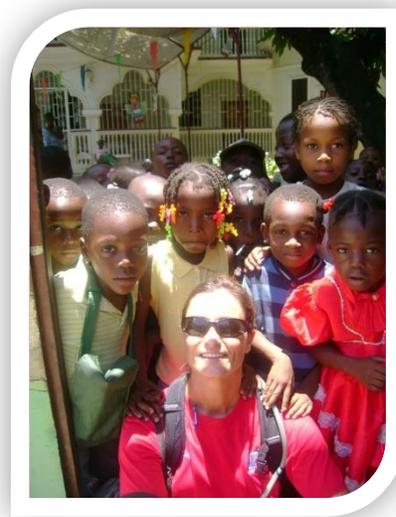
Nate Lasseur, a fire lieutenant in West Palm Beach, had been an acquaintance of mine through training during the last several years.

I knew him enough to know that I liked him and his spirit, and I thought he would certainly make an excellent traveling companion. So we made our brief plans for the trip and I met Nate at the airport. There was that electric smile and a big hug. "We're gonna have an excellent trip, I'm so glad you're going!" he said. And off we went.

Flying to our first destination of Port au Prince was unremarkable, but I must comment on seeing the island for the first time. Haiti is a gem in the middle of a deep sparkling blue ocean, and only when you get close enough to land do you realize the horrible conditions you are about to encounter on the ground. The next trip to Cap Haitien was an incredible, if not bumpy, ride over the 'land of mountains'. What a gorgeous country, with her green velvet mountains. I was smitten. However if looking closely you could see the destruction of the forests and the stains of mudslides down the mountains during the worst of the rainy season.

During the next few days Nate and I met with and trained with some of the most incredible firefighters I have ever met, not because they had the nicest station or best equipment, but because they persevered in the worst of conditions and made a commitment to learn despite their lack of equipment or support. These are truly heroes in my heart. I immediately bonded with these guys and felt deeply empathetic towards their plight. The crowning moment for me, and the reason I remain involved in Haiti, is when Nate and I had just finished teaching CPR and choking to the guys, and they gathered the curious group of children in the gym where we were assembled and proceeded to pass that lifesaving knowledge to their community. I was literally in tears: I knew then where my heart was. These people needed us and I wanted to remain involved.

I have been back to Haiti several times since then, mostly working with other health care providers serving the medical needs of the people in Cite Soleil, the most desolate slum in all of Haiti. I am anxious to get back to my firefighters and continue the work Nate and I have begun. Being a firefighter myself, loving to teach is in my blood. Haiti is now in my heart.



Haiti's favorite Gayl with kids in Haiti