



Jamaican Vibes

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Teamwork Creates Success

by Marisa Kaczmarczyk

In the heart of downtown Kingston is Hannah Town, an inner-city community where residents experience chronic poverty, high unemployment, illiteracy and periods of gang violence. In 2001, the area was the scene of volatile clashes between the police and local gang members. Since that time, the neighbourhood has grown steadily more stable, although families still struggle with the challenges of poverty.

Many families in the area live in houses with one large room that doubles as a sleeping area and kitchen. Cooking is done inside, but there is no running water so water is stored in buckets. With no indoor toilet facilities, a chamber pot or plastic bag is used when outhouses are not accessible. Other families live in one or two bedroom low income housing units constructed by the Jamaica National Housing Trust. These homes have plumbing and wiring, but still many do not have running water inside the house. Some families cannot afford to pay for electricity. Overcrowding in the home can cause children to compete for space with other family members.

Many parents are young - they had their first children as teenagers and have low literacy and few job skills, so they are unemployed or underemployed. Often single mothers are the primary or sole care-givers for the children. Some children stay out very late at night to help their parents sell trinkets or food at street dances and events. Those that stay at home while their parents are out have little supervision or support for studying or going to school. These precarious living conditions mean that many children move between the homes of their mother, father and extended family, creating a lack of stability and structure.

A Vibrant Place to Learn

In the midst of this community, St. Anne's Primary School offers hope for the future. Every day 650 children

from the area crowd into the school to attend classes from Grades One through Six. The children come from a range of home situations, which in some cases results in highly disruptive behaviour, aggression, high absenteeism, and sometimes malnutrition among the students. These conditions severely impact the ability of the children to learn and progress academically and socially.



St. Anne's Primary School

The principal of the school, Mrs. Estella Forrester, came to St. Anne's just a few years ago from St. Peter Claver Primary School, another JSH-supported project. She brought with her a wealth of experience and a vision to engage the school community – children, teachers, and parents – in creating a vibrant and healthy learning environment. Her leadership has since created a huge improvement in all aspects of the school. Jamaican Self-Help is proud to support Mrs. Forrester and her staff in providing a school programme that truly helps



Parents' meeting
Photo by Paula Wagar

View of Community from St. Anne's School
Photo by Dawn Straka



the children to succeed, despite the many hardships they face in their daily lives.

Holistic Approach to Learning

At St. Anne's Primary School, the dedicated staff team works on a more holistic approach to learning that aims to address both the academic and social issues they see among their students. Academic programmes such as special literacy classes and after school remedial reading offer the additional support for children who have fallen behind in class. Extra-curricular activities such as dance classes provide children with an incentive to come to school, and to learn team work and self-discipline. When the dance troupe wins a medal in local or regional competitions, the whole school gains from the sense of pride and accomplishment of their school representatives.

Parenting programmes assist parents to share their experiences and challenges, and learn ways that they can support their children in their school work. For example, one session had Grade Six students write open letters to their parents on concerns in their home lives. The students' letters were presented to the parents during a workshop, for discussion and learning. The guidance counsellor works with a school social worker in reaching out to high-needs families in the community. She assists them to address social needs through counselling with parents, group sessions with children and one-on-one interviews during home visits.

This team approach has already seen success. In just two years, the percentage of Grade Four

students at the school who mastered the national literacy exam has leapt from 39% in 2006 to 78% in 2008. New co-operative games and activities supervised by the teachers during recess and lunch breaks have created a marked decrease in aggressive behaviour among the children in the playground. Over 100 parents came to a recent parent-teacher meeting, and parents are showing more willingness to play a role at the school.

The goal of St. Anne's staff is to "transform the institution into a centre of excellence regardless of the social predicament of its parents." With the dedicated efforts of the St. Anne's team, and continued support from Jamaican Self-Help donors, they are well on their way to reaching their goal.

St. Anne's Programmes supported by JSH:

- After School Remedial Reading for Grade 2 students
- Dance Classes for Grade 6 students
- Social Worker/Parenting Outreach
- Playground Programme