



JAMAICAN

NEWSLETTER

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Shining Stars and Brighter Tomorrows

This month I had the privilege to accompany several JSH volunteers who travelled to Jamaica to learn more about the country, the people, JSH partners and our projects. As we set out each day to visit the different communities, both in Kingston and in the rural areas, I was once again struck by the willingness of the people to share their triumphs and their struggles. In these conversations I heard some common themes.

Early in the trip, one of our volunteers read an article from the British Observer newspaper that explored the issues of violence in cities around the globe. The author made the argument that poverty does not create violence, as most of us assume, but that inequality in society is what leads to violence. We certainly saw inequality here in Jamaica: new subdivisions built outside of Kingston along the toll highway, restaurants of all kinds that cater to the upper and middle class, shiny SUVs taking children to private schools. All this within a 10 minute drive to rundown housing complexes, mangy dogs, and children running barefoot on broken asphalt playgrounds - the neighbourhoods where JSH sends our support.



JSH volunteers with parents at St. Anne's Primary School

In our visits to these communities, we encountered the struggle that so many Jamaicans face on a day to day basis: children in Grade 3 who were still having trouble identifying the letters of the alphabet, parents trying to keep their children safe from violence in the community, hard working staff who were frustrated and demoralized as funding for vital programmes continues to be cut back.

And yet, everywhere we went, the people have hope and aspirations. Community members rely on our partners to give them the stability and the “hand up” to carry on despite the challenges they face, but they do carry on, and succeed. I talked to a grandmother, so proud of her two grandchildren who are now part of the newly formed choir at St. Anne's Primary School. This school is situated in a volatile community that has experienced a rash of violence in the past year, even targeting children directly. But with the new music programme, she said “the children are so excited, so happy to be part of the choir. They come home singing every day.” Other parents at the school also described how the school's programmes have made such a difference, despite the “wars”. These families are resilient – they survive, and have moments when they even thrive, despite their circumstances.

What follows are short sketches of the people, the places and the issues that the group encountered in the few days that they were in Jamaica. Each member of our team had opportunities to speak directly with children, parents, staff and community members – the shining stars of Kingston, Jamaica. We heard many stories, and saw the impact of our partners' efforts and the support of JSH. We hope these reflections help you to gain a sense of the current realities in Jamaica and what can be done to help Jamaica to build a brighter tomorrow.

BY MARISA KACZMARCZYK, JSH Executive Director

Jamaican Self-Help is an organization of Canadians working in solidarity to foster the development of healthy Jamaican communities through partnership based on mutual respect, understanding and a shared vision of self-determination; and to foster an understanding of global forces (North and South) and their interconnectedness.



A Family Tale

BY MARISA KACZMARCZYK

Patricia's passion and smile lit up the whole room, "I am a Lane Leader," she said, describing how she volunteers in the inner city community of Bennet Lands as part of S-Corner's community development programme. As a lane leader, Patricia looks after the needs of her "lane" or neighbourhood. If a child is out of school, she checks in with the mother and makes sure he goes back to class; if an elderly neighbour needs her roof fixed, Patricia will call for help from others in the community – one to bring the wood, another the nails and the tools – and together they will fix the roof so the rain doesn't come in. She makes sure people know their rights and their responsibilities. And she cares.

"S-Corner trained me to be a lane leader, and they do so much more," she exclaimed. Patricia's daughter Chenise, attended the S-Corner afterschool homework programme as a child, and went on to Ardenne High School – one of the most prestigious girl's schools in Jamaica. She graduated and now has a good job at a cell phone company. Patricia's son, Ian – known as JayJay – was attending S-Corner's classes when he was selected to travel to Canada as part of a youth delegation organized by Jamaican Self-Help. "He still talks about that trip like it was just yesterday," she said.

When he returned to Jamaica, S-Corner helped him to attend truck driving school and now Ian is working as a truck driver. He's 27 and lives with his own family in Kingston.

After hearing such a positive account, it was disheartening to hear that S-Corner has been challenged lately as funders change priorities or withdraw from Jamaica. The Board has had to eliminate some programmes and lay off staff. The remaining staff continue to help the community as they can and look forward to the day when they can resume these activities that make such a difference in people's lives.



Patricia Mitchell & Kevin Clarke at S-Corner

Building a New Life

BY GILLIAN SANDEMAN

It's hard to believe that the polite young men and women in their shining white shirts and school ties have been selected for this programme because they come from dangerous, crime-filled regions of Kingston, Jamaica. They are struggling with reading – some of them although the right age for Grade 6 or even Grade 9 need help with the most basic literacy and numeracy skills.

The goal at St. Margaret's Human Resources Centre is to give each of their students the reading and numeracy capacity that will allow them to pass Ministry of Education examinations and return to high school, enter trade school or find work. For the woodworking students, much of the curriculum covers the basic theoretical and practical carpentry skills. For this, they must have good reading skills. The two streams of the curriculum complement each other and many students reach the Level 1 or Level 2 standard in carpentry which gives them the opportunities for employment or entrance to further training at HEART (Human Employment and Resource training) academies.

Jamaican Self-Help funds this woodworking programme and other parts of the Centre. "Without your help," says Suzanne Smith, Manager of the Centre, "St. Margaret's would have to close."

While visiting the Centre, I heard the students explain the differences between carpentry, joinery and cabinet making. I watched them studying the definitions of various cuts and joins and later saw them working to produce a wardrobe which a community member had ordered. This commission was one of many – clearly these students are producing work that people are happy to have in their homes.

All of this was done with pride, seriousness, respect for their work and for their teacher. The incentive to finish the training and build a life where it is possible to move beyond the difficult beginnings and into employment is powerful.

The donors and volunteers of Jamaican Self-Help help make this possible, and students and parents thanked JSH wherever we went.



If I Had a Million Dollars

BY CATHIE MORRISSEY

I am here in Kingston, Jamaica on a hot November day and I have just returned from a visit to Tavares Gardens Primary School. This inner city school at one time had an enrolment of over 1000 students. There are now 210 students because families have moved away due to violence in the neighbourhood. Children were afraid to go to school. Lately, the enrolment seems to have stabilized, in part because JSH has been able to fund music, drama, and physical education programs. Because of these programs, the children are excited to attend school and the parents make an extra effort to send them to class.

As a retired teacher of Junior and Senior Kindergarten, there are two situations at the school that are of great concern to me.

When teachers become ill in a Jamaican school there are no supply teachers to take their place. Of the 10 regular teachers, two teachers are currently away on sick leave. Therefore the library teacher has had to move to the Grade 2 class to teach and there is now only one literacy teacher to help children with reading instead of two. Mr. Malcolm,

the sole literacy teacher, teaches about 20 students with special needs in a classroom cramped with desks and no room to move. I sensed the children's frustration because there is no way Mr. Malcolm can divide his time amongst all the children to meet their needs. I can only say that I was glad to be there today with my two colleagues, Gillian and Kate, to help Mr. Malcolm for a very short time.

The other situation that greatly concerns me is the empty classroom devoid of pre-school children. Two years ago the government set up a classroom in the school with the intention of starting a pre-school class for four and five year olds. It still has not started. We visited the room of desks, minus teacher, children and learning materials. Children have to start Grade One at Tavares Gardens without having any school readiness skills. This is not a great beginning, and will inevitably create problems for some children to succeed.

"If I had a million dollars" to fix these two situations, I would in a minute. Wouldn't you?

Shining Bright at S-Corner

BY JOYCE ARSCOTT

Meet Danielle, Theo, Vallin and Roxroy, all 20 and 21 years old. They live in the same low income housing unit in an area of Kingston known for violence, drugs and gangs. Growing up in this community, they have faced difficult times. Yet they have dreams and aspirations. And to follow their ambitions, they have all attended or are attending classes at the S-Corner Waltham Centre.



Danielle, Theo, Vallin & Roxroy

A motivated, enthusiastic young woman, Danielle lives with her mother. The rest of her family lives in another part of Jamaica. She has been taking classes at the Centre for almost one year now. Danielle is working toward passing her CXC exam to have the possibility of attending nursing school.

Vallin and Roxroy have both attended the centre and are now looking for work. Vallin is a track runner and lives with his father. Both Vallin and Roxroy would like to become soldiers so they can help decrease violence in their country. Both want their Jamaica to be a better Jamaica.

A happy, enthusiastic young man, Theo attended the centre for two years. He is an intelligent and motivated student who has truly benefited from the teachings of the centre. Theo is now taking physics and biology at a technical college in order to go on to become an electrical engineer.

In an area where hope is sometimes non-existent, S-Corner provides guidance and education, but mostly it provides young people with a place to gather, a listening ear, and the possibility of a better life.



Struggling to survive in Jamaica's realities

One of the biggest concerns of Jamaicans right now is earning a basic living wage, so that they can afford to buy basic necessities. Jamaica's minimum wage is about \$1.38 per hour or \$55 CAD per 40 hour work week. The minimum wage of Ontario, by comparison, is \$11 per hour or \$440 per week.

Despite this stark contrast, the cost of living in Jamaica is relatively similar to that of Canada. For example, the prices of some basic grocery items are: 12 eggs ~ \$2.80 CA, loaf of white bread ~\$2.85, carton of milk ~ \$2.40, 800g bag of white rice ~\$3.00. So it would take 2 hours of work to pay for a dozen eggs. In Canada, that would be \$22 for a dozen eggs given the same circumstances! Many Jamaicans cannot afford these prices. As a result they buy what they can afford from local vendors and subsist on rice and beans and a bit of chicken. Nutrition is often compromised and leaves these individuals prone to a number of health conditions. For parents this may mean sacrificing their own wellbeing, to ensure that of their children.

While the tuition payments for primary school in Jamaica are paid by the government, parents are still responsible for auxiliary fees. These include items such as uniforms, textbooks and various school supplies (paper, pens, pencils etc.). This may mean that the parents can only afford to send their child to school a couple days a week. Once youth reach high school age they are required to pay for their tuition and also must pay to register for any national exams such as the CXC. This is one factor that contributes to fewer Jamaicans pursuing higher levels of education.

The cost of housing in downtown Kingston is also similar to cities in Canada, with rent for a two bedroom apartment costing around \$1700.00/month. Since most impoverished individuals cannot afford adequate housing,



"Shanty town" housing

they live in "Shanty town" communities. Homes are constructed from a combination of corrugated steel and excess building supplies, such as wooden pallets. The high cost of electricity,



A typical market stall in Jamaica

combined with heavy reliance on it as an energy source, result in individuals stealing electricity from power directly. As a result, Jamaican power companies have threatened to reduce the supply of electricity to theft prone areas.

While education plays a vital role in building capacity to enable individuals to secure employment, these skill sets need to be practical in nature. Many educated individuals struggle to find employment because they find their skill sets are no longer relevant. There is hope with a new trend to train individuals in skills that are applicable (e.g. computer programming) not only in Jamaica, but globally as well. Social assistance programs such as PATH and JEEP (Jamaican Emergency Employment Plan) provide some opportunity, but these programmes continue to be strained financially while simultaneously experiencing an increased demand for services. For things to change the Jamaican government needs to prioritize job creation, while supporting capacity-building programmes for individuals so they have the necessary tools and are empowered to succeed.

BY KENDRA KIRBY

Kendra is a nursing student from Trent University, currently on placement with JSH.

¹Rough prices obtained from local sources and from <http://supermarket.jamaica.com/customer/home.php> and converted from USD to CAD

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