

Road Trip From USA to Dame Marie: Difficult Travel

This September was the second mission where we drove across the only main artery crossing Haiti from East to West. As such, there is a lot of learning to do about the geography, and rest stops, and bottlenecks in the great distances we have to cover. To give everyone a little idea about how difficult getting to Dame Marie is, I will summarize our first steps.

- Leaving Saint Francis Hospital at 3 AM Saturday morning.
- Arriving at JFK 5:30 AM NY
- Trying to leave at scheduled time 9:30 AM but passenger sick and many delays while he was deplaned, his luggage found and removed. Eventually leaving NY four hours late.
- Arriving in Port au Prince around 5 PM
- Gathering gear, clearing customs, and picking up our two Haitian surgeons 6:30 PM
- Getting on bus and taking 5 hour ride to Caye where the Catholic retreat center was.
- Dinner at midnight at the Retreat Center.
- Up at 6 AM, on the bus to Dame Marie for another 6 hours.
- Have lunch, and the off to the hospital to set up the OR, and greet the waiting patients.

We always build in extra time for unexpected occurrence, but this is a first that we were four hours late leaving the US. Broken buses, broken airplanes, yes, but never a sick passenger before we even left the gate.

The Haitian construction teams continue to work hard 24/7 to try and make this apparently single lane road more passable. And for the most part they are doing a great job. But they have the devil of a climate with rainstorms, and hurricanes that are doing their best to slow the process.

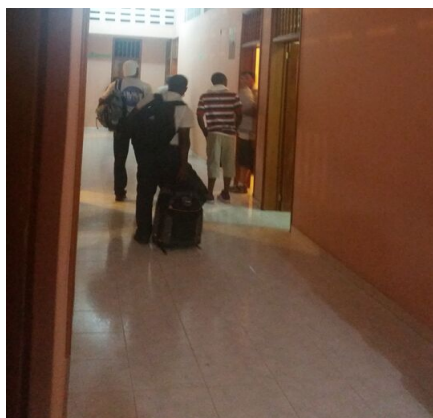


High up in the mountains, on a roadway that is still only single lane, we came upon the construction workers clearing a landslide. And for once our timing was perfect as we were the first to pass this obstruction.

The Catholic Retreat Center in Caye

I know many who read these mission stories are potential missionaries who are trying to decide if they have the courage, stamina, and adventuresome spirit that is required to render our much needed service

for our sisters and brothers in Dame Marie. It is also my duty not to understate how serious a commitment it is to sign up for one of our weeks of service. So with these stories I walk the fine line of reality, and our hope for the future we are building in Dame Marie. Here was our much-needed rest stop at midnight our first night of arrival in Haiti.



Setting up the OR

Sunday afternoon, it felt great to finally stretch our legs and start to do what we traveled so long to accomplish. The first order of business is to reopen the operating room, pre op and post op rooms. Almost side by side with a matter of a few steps between them is where the magic of better health through surgery happens.



And just a half a day later, the work begins to make miracles happen for the people of Dame Marie.



A New Anesthesia Group

We are now blessed to have added a sixth hospital group to our growing missionary band. Our Chief CRNA sent out a news blast to their statewide organization when it became apparent some people's plans had changed and we were short anesthesia personnel. Three exceptional members of Baystate Medical Center answered the call on short notice. Their skills were awesome and their attitudes even more so. And here they are at the end of a very successful week, and now are some of the newest members of our Dame Marie Family. Meet Joel, Sarah, our Denise, and Kate.



Our Haitian Surgeons

General surgeons are much in demand, and sometimes difficult to obtain for certain times of the year. We were blessed to have Dr. Wilkens Gilbert and Dr. Rolph Richeme team up for this September service. They were classmates in Medical School, and Residency together, and were able to serve their people, working for the first time, as Attending Surgeons across the table from each other. Truly remarkable individuals and the future of surgical care in Haiti.



And a word of thanks to Bette Gebrian RN MPH PhD and Dr. Cesar of Jeremie, who are sending young women afflicted with breast cancer for surgery. Our fledging referral service was begun by Dr Dan several trips ago, and now is growing thanks to everyone's efforts to render this important service to young women without options previously.

Our Pre-op, Intra-op, and Post-op team members

The purpose of these stories is multifold. But one of the reasons is to thank those selfless members who scrimp and save to come, leave their families, and use precious vacation time that could be spent on themselves and their families. Instead they defy the travel hardships, the heat, bugs, long hours, and difficult personal challenges and professional challenges to serve those they don't even know. And for the OR personnel, many don't even see the light of day literally. So a shout out to those of you who came and served and smiled through it all.



PACU: Peggy and Claire



OR: Candace



OR: Kathy and Jodi, and not shown Collette



Pre Op: Maggie on Far right

Referral from Anse-d'Hainault

At the end of our week, we received notice from the next largest town about a patient in labor who needed a repeat C/S. Usually Dame Marie sends their pregnant patients there who need an operative delivery. For some reason, their staff was unavailable. We were happy to help out. This shows the growing awareness in this greater region of Haiti of the value of the services we offer to the people when we are here.



Not all Beginnings are Happy

The death of young mothers in Haiti is staggering. And that is because the majority still deliver at home without any skilled providers except the village shaman or untrained midwife. And when they do reach a health facility, most of them do not have a working OR, or anesthesia services. And what is a worse statistic, for every mother that dies, seven more are seriously injured and suffer lifelong pain, societal shame, and inability to work from tears that involve their bladder and rectum and the areas in between. This was brought home to us as we watched one of the Delivery room nurses grow larger during her

pregnancy with each trip we made. She was having a large baby and we were hoping we could be there for her at her delivery. It was not meant to be and she had a beautiful baby girl. However, in order for this to happen, the local doctor had to make enough room for the baby to pass. She suffered a complication of this incision, and suffered as her vagina and rectum became connected. She had had five failed repair operations by the time we came back to Dame Marie this September.



The fortunate news is that with a specialized operation and surgeon available in Port au Prince, she can be a full functioning healthy women again. We will be collecting dollars to make this happen for her. However, without our connections she could not afford this treatment. Here is Marie France with Kathy. Now we put a face, a smile, and a beautiful person to this horrible statistic.

Ultrasound and Medical Equipment arrives in Dame Marie

Last Spring a member of our OB/GYN Department made an extraordinary donation. Dr. Marco Morel, one of the senior members of our group at Saint Francis, was closing one of his offices. He offered to donate it all to the mission in Dame Marie. So about ten volunteers disassembled his office, and put it on a truck destined for a container ship to Port au Prince. The materials arrived in July, and then made the long trek by truck to Dame Marie. All the equipment was there waiting for us when we arrived in September. And Dr. Morel's US machine made the difference in diagnosis for two young women with obstetrical complications. Both might have died. The best news is that this machine will stay and help the local staff do a better job of caring for their patients. And we will not have to be there for this to happen. This photo tells it all.



General Helper's Extraordinaire

There are a million tasks and chores to keep an operating room running. And usually we have room on our teams for one special individual who seems to know how to get anything we ask, done. This trip, Vic was our man, and he did an amazing job, sometimes teaming up with other members who have nonmedical skills to keep our equipment functional.



With that smile, he could have charmed anything to work harder to please him.

And on a lighter note, here are some of his other creations.

The only white baby photo in all of Dame Marie, now gracing the Delivery room with a chair from Dr. Morel. And a valuable blood pressure cuff without legs until now.



Dr. Tellus Visits Us in the US

To change directions for a moment. And to demonstrate the growing sharing among the professionals on both sides of the ocean. Dr. Tellus came to Boston to visit his Aunt in August. While there, Kathy Aries invited him to a gathering of assorted team members and family and friends at her home. More importantly for him, our mission member, Brenda, who is a Captain of the fire department in East Hartford, brought him to her department where he got to experience emergency calls first hand. He also went out on a call in a fire truck, and took advantage of their training equipment. We hope to someday build an ER in Dame Marie, and we hope Dr. Tellus will be one of the skilled local physicians in charge.



Thank you Brenda and Kathy for making his visit here so worthwhile.

Group Photo

And here is our September band of Sisters and Brothers who made all this and more happen. Twenty-five surgeries, several deliveries, many ultrasounds and patients seen and evaluated.



Final Image and Thoughts

Well-meaning people often ask why we risk so much, and travel so far when there are many poor in desperate means much closer to home. And the answer is simple really. There are no safety nets of any kind in most of Haiti. Whether you live or die is random, arbitrary, and totally unpredictable. It doesn't matter if you have money, are previously healthy, or are young or old. If you need acute medical attention and you find yourself in the wrong place, you will die. And our teams have the capability to change that equation. 15 highly trained medical professionals working as one, can truly make a difference. And like the Randy Dunn Song says, "We all bleed red." And more simply, the reason is the People of Dame Marie asked us to come and help their fishing village when we were far off in Port au Prince looking for a new home for service. Their cry of need was the loudest and spoke to our hearts. We are glad we listened, for all of us are forever changed.




In Closing

I hope you have once again enjoyed reading of life on the mission trail in a land only four hours away by air, but a lifetime away from the life that we enjoy in the US. . During this September week of service, you have read that we were able to bring better health to many different kinds of patients. Every one of these individuals has their own unique story of their struggle to carve out a happy life for themselves and their families. Mostly fisherman and farmers or tradesman, their life is a daily struggle with the forces of nature and poverty and malnutrition.

All of the members of our teams have seen what our commitment has accomplished in now our fourth year in Haiti. Our dreams stretch skyward, for an improved hospital, a regional Emergency Medical Service, and the chance to make a true difference to good people who just had the poor luck to be born in a country without blessings. We welcome any and all help to make this happen.

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael R. Bourque MD".

Medical Director for MATH Dame Marie, formerly Saint Francis IMM



Medical Aid To Haiti

www.medicalaidtohaiti.org



www.saintfrancisimm.org