

## 20TH ANNIVERSARY: THE LEGACY OF THE HAITIAN NETWORK GROUP OF DETROIT

*Rosario Danier*



Two days after I was elected to the Office of the President of Haitian Network Group of Detroit (HNGD), Haiti was struck by one of the most destructive earthquakes in the history of the country.

Within hours my phone started to ring. I reached out to HNGD board members and scheduled a meeting to strategize our response to the disaster.

People came to offer their support and inquire about their loved ones living in Haiti. Some were looking for reassurance that everything would be fine.

I quickly realized I had a grieving community in need of comfort, solace and a way to mourn the dead.

I also realized that the swiftly unfolding situation was beyond my ability to handle alone.

Fritz Momplaisir, activist and co-founder of HNGD, reached out to The Charles Wright Museum of African American History and, with a group of current and former HNGD board members, organized an event at the museum to honor those who had perished in the earthquake.

As the President of HNGD, I still struggled with how to personally respond to the tragedy.

The event at the Charles Wright Museum was unlike anything I had experienced in any previous position of leadership. In addition to the emotional impact, the local Haitian community was looking for me, as their leader, to provide them with comfort and direction.

Following closely the events unfolding in Haiti, I came across an article that described the destruction of Holy Trinity Music School (HTMS), a nonprofit institution that provided high level musical training, specializing in vocal and instrumental instruction. HTMS taught over fifteen hundred Haitian students in the music arts.

I contacted a friend at the Jazz Network Foundation to coordinate a benefit concert on behalf of Holy Trinity Music School. The event was called "Night of Classical Music" that featured local artists from Detroit and instructors from HTMS.

HNGD got the word out and in response, Dr. Liana Valente, Director of the People to People Project at Sigma Alpha Iota philanthropies, Inc. traveled from Florida with a check for

\$2,000 and a pledge of \$30,000 worth of musical instruments for the Holy Trinity Music School in Haiti. International support came in the form of **Mrs. Nicole Saint-Victor, a famed Haitian Soprano artist** and music teacher at HTMS, who traveled from Haiti to perform at "Night of Classical Music." True to HNDG's mission, we promoted Haiti's culture and raised more than forty thousand dollars (\$40,000.00) in donations and musical instruments for the school.



It was a defining moment for the HNGD and for me, personally. We came together, harnessed the collective energy of our need to help, and accomplished more than we had hoped to for the victims of the earthquake. HNGD represented our community and served well its members and supporters here and abroad.

In retrospect, ten years prior to the earthquake, three young Haitians, Fritz Momplaisir, Magareth Corkery and Dr. Soledad Nelson, formed HNGD. The primary purpose was to preserve, promote, and share Haitian culture in the State of Michigan. They began by organizing small events where they would share a Haitian meal and dance to the rhythms of Konpa music. Unexpectedly, the co-founders created an entity that has endured despite many challenges and obstacles.

It is said that there can be no organization without dedicated members, but we were reminded frequently that there could be no organization without dedicated leadership. HNGD filled the mandate for both excellent leadership and loyal membership.

HNGD's response to Haiti's devastating earthquake is not unique. Since its inception, HNGD has organized several activities including the 2004 Bicentennial Conference, multiple lectures, plays, poetry reading, Health Fair, film festival and funded scholarship program for Nursing students living in Haiti. Along the way we came to embrace meaningfully a place far away and, in the process, a new family at HNGD was born.

Unconditionally, this family came to respect and love each other and learned that they are never alone.

If the true value of an organization can be measured by its absence, then it is hard for me to envision a world without The Haitian Network Group of Detroit.

The knowledge we gained by our interactions with the community, the people we met, and the lives we impacted engendered in us lasting friendships that will never be replaced. More than what the co-founders imagined, their efforts evolved into something necessary and great. Their legacy has endured and morphed into something none of us anticipated. Two decades later, HNGD is celebrating its 20th Anniversary and the future for the organization looks bright. To Fritz Momplaisir, Magareth Corkery and Dr. Soledad Nelson, the co-founders of HNGD, and to all the past and current Board members, the Detroit and Haitian communities owe an enormous debt of gratitude to you for your vision and service. ■