



INAUGURAL HAITI HEALTH MISSION:

AN ACADEMIC-COMMUNITY AND INTERPROFESSIONAL COLLABORATION FOR GLOBAL COMMUNITY SERVICE AND LESSON BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Imagine traveling to an island in the Caribbean, seeing clear blue waters and beaches with palm trees, sensing the ocean breezes and waves (well, occasionally) and staying at a “top floor, waterfront condo” with meals being served three times a day. Not to mention daily breakfast with mango and pineapple. On a vacation or a mission, that’s the question. During that journey on the island, we may ride in an SUV on curvy, muddy, and unpaved terrain for four hours, sometimes in the rain, across a river and in the night. We may flip the switch but get no light, turn the faucet but get no water, and if we are lucky enough to take a shower, we become sweaty again minutes later. We may enter the bathroom with a cockroach on the wall, wake up in the middle of the night with a chicken next to us, and obsessively apply DEET yet still attract hungry mosquitoes.

Does anyone want to join us for this vacation to the Caribbean? Among the twenty plus students in the physician's assistant program and the over 160 in the pharmacy



program, only a few individuals were lucky to win the lottery drawing for this trip – a real-world learning experience and life-changing opportunity. Imagine active learning. Think, go, and share. Let's reflect upon it, commit to going next time or do something to support it, and share with others about this mission to Haiti – the poorest country in the western hemisphere, perhaps the world.

On Thursday, May 29 at 6:00 am, thirteen people with a common purpose, often mentioned in health professional oaths to “aid in the relief in human suffering,” departed the U.S. Capital for the Haiti Capital – Port-au-Prince. All left their loved ones, their luxury lifestyle, and their “e- and i-products” (electronics and i-phone or i-whatever, as it's no longer about (m)e and I), to embark on a journey to help the Haitian people on a weeklong mission trip.

This Haiti mission is an academic-community and interprofessional initiative among members of the UMES School of Pharmacy and Health Professions (Pharmacy and Physician Assistant Programs), organizers from the Health and Education for Haiti, Inc. St. Francis of Assisi Church and pharmacist preceptors from the Indian Health Service and the U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS). The interest and planning started about a year ago when Dr. Frank Nice, a retired captain from the USPHS and



current pharmacist at the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, came to speak to pharmacy and physician assistant students at a Professional Development Seminar (Common Hour). Since then, he and his co-organizer, Mrs. Pat Labuda, came to UMES for meetings to plan for the trip. The team includes UMES students, staff, faculty, preceptor, and alumna, as well as pre-departure language and culture training from the Foreign Language Department.

Team members included:

- Dr. Frank Nice, Health and Education for Haiti, Inc.
- Mrs. Pat Labuda, Health and Education for Haiti, Inc.
- Dr. Hoai-An Truong, UMES Pharmacy Faculty
- Dr. Yen H. Dang, UMES Pharmacy Faculty
- Ms. Annette Rogers, UMES Pharmacy Staff
- Dr. Jessica Steinert, USPHS Indian Health Service
- Dr. Courtney Murphy, UMES Pharmacy Alumna
- Ms. Maxine Cyprien, UMES Physician Assistant Student
- Ms. Melissa Graham, UMES Physician Assistant Student
- Ms. Renee Linda, UMES Physician Assistant Student
- Ms. Kareemah Muhammed, UMES Pharmacy Student
- Ms. Adanna Anyiwo, UMES Pharmacy Student
- Ms. Kimberly Mitchell, UMES Pharmacy Student

Throughout the mission, the team conducted health needs assessments at two community clinics, set up two pharmacies, provided health care and medications for patients at a community clinic, toured two hospitals, visited an orphanage, and attended class at a nursing school. According to some team members, this mission is distinctive because “we immerse ourselves – eat with the local hosts and live with the Haitian people.” We worshipped together in a church on the beach, we were introduced to the community, taught at a primary school, participated in a talent show and dance, and walked along the beach with the children. It was an amazing experience when the children held our hands when we walked and gave us conch shells as souvenirs, which will always remind us about the sounds of Haiti – the soul of the Caribbean.

Personally, it was a touching moment as I walked along the path in the neighborhood to the clinic and encountered a man. He talked in Creole, and I spoke English. He walked up to me, shook my hand, and placed my hand on his heart over his bare chest. Humanity is the universal language. I understood. It was an indescribable feeling. I imagine that it would be hard for team members to deny that they were emotional at some point during the mission, especially when we personally interacted with our patients.

In addition to the humbling, rewarding experiences and amazing, lifelong memories, our lesson beyond the academic walls taught us new meanings to poverty, gratitude, flexibility, patience, emotion, attitude, and “chikungunya” – perhaps the most popular word due to a recent epidemic due to mosquito bites, hence the concern and obsessiveness of the use of DEET by some team members. Fortunately, no one caught it. Only one person felt sick for a couple of days toward the end of the trip. Overall, the team supported each other and returned healthy. Since the first day of the mission, Dr. Nice stated that “we know that it will be and it is difficult as we experience life in a third world country. No matter how hard it may be, we come and go in a week. Yet, the Haitian people live there all their lives.” Upon departure, team members wrote their actions to help Haitians or commit to support sustainability on a “postcard” which will be mailed to them in 3 months post-trip. Let us always be reminded the lessons of simplicity, giving-back, or pay-it-forward as we returned to our lives.

“See not just with your eyes, but with your heart. Care not just with your minds, but with your open hands.”

A reflection by Hoai-An Truong, PharmD, MPH