
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Three Days in Haiti Part 3: Adversity and Hope

The final part of this three-part series looks at the day-to-day lives of Haitian people and how they find happiness in a country filled with constant physical struggle and hardship.

By Emily Beers

October 2013



Courtesy of Emily Beers

About two hours away by car from McDonald, where Julie Roberts does most of her work in Haiti, is the tiny village of Jarvais. Because the village isn't close to any cities, its people don't have access to imported goods. They depend entirely on each other and the resources of the land for survival.

1 of 9

"For some reason Jarvais is particularly poor, its people particularly unhealthy," Roberts explains as she jumps into her Pathfinder, a vehicle she shipped from Florida to accommodate her travel whenever she's in Haiti.

Today she's headed to Jarvais to do medical work. She knows it's going to be a long and emotional day in the relentless Haitian heat.

This isn't Roberts' first trip to Jarvais. She's been there a couple of times to provide medical treatment, and last year she funded a program that sends a nurse there twice a month.

"I'm skeptical, though. I have no idea if a nurse is actually getting out there as much as she's supposed to," Roberts says to her four CrossFit friends who are with her to help. "You never know with this country."

The Village of Jarvais

It's a smoking-hot 95 F on a Tuesday afternoon in April.

Roberts and her crew have just driven an hour inland from McDonald. The area is as rural as it gets; it feels like the middle of nowhere. To their left is a river, where a dozen or so people are scrubbing themselves clean. Women wander along the road carrying heavy loads atop their heads. Lean cows and horses graze freely.

These animals don't look anything like the plump species you see in North America; they look emaciated.

"Maybe that's what cows are supposed to look like when they're not pumped with corn and hormones," says one of Roberts' friends.

Huge rice fields cover the surrounding land. Next to the road, and sometimes spilling out onto the road, are giant tarps covered in recently cultivated rice lying out to dry out.

"Rice used to be one of their main industries," Roberts explains.

Rice is a staple food for Haitians, and prior to and during the 1980s the country was self-sufficient in its rice production. But in the 1990s, a change in trade policies meant imported rice became cheaper than domestic rice. As the demand for domestic rice declined, many Haitian farmers were displaced; the result was a nightmare for everyone involved in Haiti's rice industry.

"Now it's cheaper to buy American rice than it is for them to buy their own rice. It's just been another major obstacle Haiti has had to deal with over the years," says Roberts just



Courtesy of Emily Beers

The people of Jarvais are isolated, without access to stores, schools or medical treatment.

as she hits an unexpectedly deep pothole in the road, the painful kind that has you questioning the vehicle's suspension as well as the road's ability to handle motor vehicles.

"During the rainy season, we wouldn't even be able to drive on this road," Roberts says. "It becomes pure mud."

Because of this, even if the people of Jarvais had cars—which they don't—they'd rarely get the chance to venture outside their small village. Grocery stores, schools, hospitals, take many hours to reach by foot.

Finally, the group arrives in Jarvais. The classification “village” seems generous, as it appears to be no more than a small cluster of mud huts with grass roofs.

Roberts parks her Pathfinder and is immediately greeted by a dozen or so bright-eyed young boys and girls who swarm the vehicle. Some of them are clothed. Others are naked. Hardly anyone is wearing footwear.

“Blanc, blanc,” they yell, flailing their arms wildly with excitement. Their excitement gets louder as the five white CrossFit athletes exit the vehicle.

Roberts gets to work. Men and women—young and old—arrive from various huts eager for her help in remedying their ailments. She takes blood pressure and hands out painkillers, advice and antibiotics.

One boy who looks to be about 18 steps up to the seat that has unofficially become the patient’s chair. Roberts can’t find anything wrong with the boy, who doesn’t articulate much about his “illness.”

“Some of them just want to see what they can get from me,” Roberts says. “They like the excitement and attention.”

“Give him a little baggie of Flintstone vitamins,” she says to the Haitian nurse.

“Take one a day,” Roberts tells the young man. He grabs the plastic bag, smiles and pops a vitamin into his mouth as he walks away.

The group of children keeps growing in size as the time passes. The dozen children who originally greeted them at the Pathfinder have exploded into three dozen, each



Courtesy of Emily Beers

As in Africa, resources in Haiti are scarce, and even drinking water can be hard to find.



Courtesy of Emily Beers

Roberts does what she can with her limited medical supplies.

of them eager to touch Roberts and her white friends. They smile and laugh shyly as they stroke arms and hair and gently latch on to the pasty white hands of their new North American friends.

Roberts pats one child on the head whose hair is a copper orange color. The child looks up at her, flashes a wide grin and embraces Roberts' leg.

"This discoloring of the hair is a sign of malnutrition," Roberts says.

As in other areas of the country, many of the children of Jarvais have distended navels—from parasitic worms known as whipworms or hookworms. Roberts could choose to treat the worms, but she knows as soon as the children rid themselves of them they'll go right back to drinking the contaminated standing water. And the children will be right back to where they started.

Someone in the village mentions to Roberts she should treat a paralyzed man in a hut about 50 meters away.

"Where is he? Take me to him," Roberts says.

Two minutes later, she discovers a man no older than 30 curled up on the floor of a hut; there's just a thin sheet between him and the earth. The right side of his body has been eaten away by atrophy.

Roberts chats with the man via a translator and re-emerges.

"This man's had a stroke," she says. "It was a minor stroke as he says his bowels are still working well and he can talk perfectly, but the right side of his body is paralyzed.

"We're taking him with us and getting him to a hospital in St. Marc," she tells her friends. "This could still be treatable. If he were in Canada, we would have given him an antithrombotic and he would likely have made a full recovery."

She adds: "If we don't get him to a hospital, he'll die in that hut."

Roberts tells the man's elderly mother the plan. Unable to contain her obvious excitement at the good fortune that just came her way, she smiles the kind of smile that looks like it should be accompanied by a celebratory leap. She has no more than three teeth. Her eyes sparkle with relief.

With the help of a small army of villagers, they get the man out of his hut and load him into the back of the Pathfinder, where he can lie down. His mother hops in and props her son up against her to make him more comfortable.

"We'll just have to pay the hospital in St. Marc \$50 for him to stay there, to pay for his food, and we'll make sure he gets treated," Roberts reassures the man's mother.

As they drive away from the village, the villagers begin to fight over some scrap wood Roberts emptied from the back of her vehicle to make room for the man. In Haiti, wood of any kind is a hot commodity.

A group has gathered around the wood pieces, while one woman has appointed herself to guard the pile. She's trying to stop anyone from snagging a piece. One young boy manages to sneak a large chunk of two-by-six and runs off with it.

The woman guarding the wood picks up a large stone and charges toward the boy. She hurls the stone and smokes the boy directly in the back. He drops the piece of wood, as if to say he surrenders, and runs off into the distance.

Normal life has resumed in Jarvais.

"Most of those kids have probably never left Jarvais," says Roberts, driving away. "And there's a good chance they never will."

Adversity: From Business to Haitian Life

In the July 7, 2010, *Harvard Business Review* article "[When Adversity Strikes, What Do You Do?](#)" Paul G. Stoltz, Ph.D., asked the reader to answer questions about adversity.



The coastal village of McDonald.

"How often do you use adversity to achieve gains you could never enjoy without it? How many moments do you have when, like an alchemist, you convert adversity into fuel that propels you to a place you could never get to without it?" he asked.

Stoltz is the CEO of PEAK Learning Inc. He's the author of four internationally best-selling books. His business ideas are used within Harvard Business School's Executive Education program.

One of the themes Stoltz deals with in his books and when consulting and coaching business elites has to do with how people deal with adversity. Using adversity to become more resilient and ultimately achieve greater fulfillment and success is one of Stoltz's main goals.

"The central element in exceptional human effectiveness must have something to do with how people respond to the difficult side of life, or adversity," Stoltz wrote on Peaklearning.com.

Further, Stoltz believes "how we respond to life's 'tough stuff'—from the smallest hassles, annoyances and hindrances to the most daunting tragedies—plays an epicenter-level role in all human endeavor."

Stoltz, of course, is focused on business leadership and organizational effectiveness, but the lessons taught to Harvard MBA candidates have been learned long ago in Haiti.

In Haiti, day-to-day lives provide all the adversity in the world. Every day, many Haitians deal with both small challenges and large tragedies. Their days spent searching for food, walking miles upon miles for clean water, and battling constant illness and hunger are like a never-ending series of hero workouts strung together for years. Life is challenging, and not because the Internet is down for five minutes.

From a North American standpoint, it's easy to look at Haitian life as miserable or unhappy. If, for example, you go



Courtesy of Emily Beers

For the children of McDonald, hardship does not always mean unhappiness.

Courtesy of Carey Peterson



Gabriel Nixon, the mayor of McDonald.

to the village of Kannot—half a dozen miles from the city of St. Marc—you'll find children with worms, children with scabies, and children wandering around with infected flesh hanging out of their arms from a recent machete wound. And you'll find stressed-out parents unable to feed these children.

But you'll also see kids laughing, playing freely, skipping rope, playing soccer, enjoying being young. And you'll see a community of people who band together for support, who love each other and look after each other's children, who cook for each other, who share with each other, who help each other with any task that needs doing.

Life is hard and full of adversity for Haitians, but spending time in a village reveals it's not miserable.

"If you suffer hardship your entire life, it strengthens your character," Roberts said. "They're able to find happiness in small things, in small victories. They're not told they need all this stuff to be happy."

She added: "The fabric of their culture is based on community. And in order to overcome their constant adversity, the survival of the individual depends on their community, and the thing that allows them to be happy is the strength of their social community. That's what makes them good people, too."

Difficult, Not Unhappy

Roberts and her crew experienced many First World problems while in Haiti.

Gabriel Nixon, the mayor of McDonald and one of Roberts' dear friends, did everything he could to ensure his guests were treated properly.

Not only did he have two women from the village cook them authentic Haitian meals of rice and beans—and sometimes chicken or fish—each day, but he also spent four days catering to all their other North American needs.

In a village where most people don't have electricity, he managed to acquire a fan for their house so they

could sleep more comfortably. And when the electricity decided to stop working in McDonald, he hunted down a gas-operated generator to make their lives easier. And when Roberts locked herself out of her own house, Nixon spent three hours finding a way to get her back inside.

Nixon had bigger problems he could have been trying to solve.

He runs what he calls “a house for old,” an old-aged home where half a dozen elderly men and women of McDonald live. Most of the “elders,” who haven’t even reached the age of 60, are sick or injured. Nixon ensures they’re as comfortable as possible in their weakened state.

And he runs the local school, where he does his best to give malnourished children an education. On top of this, he has his own family—including an adopted child—to look after and feed.

On Roberts’ final night in Haiti, yet another problem arises, and Nixon doesn’t hesitate.

“We don’t even have enough gas to get back to the airport tomorrow,” Roberts says. “There was no gas at the gas station.”

“I know. You see, in Haiti, sometimes ... no gas,” Nixon explains.

“When is the gas arriving?” Roberts asks.

“Um, gas is supposed to arrive Friday,” Nixon responds.

It’s currently Wednesday afternoon.

“So there’s no gas? Not even in St. Marc?” she asks.

“No, no gas. Not in St. Marc. No gas in Port-au-Prince,” Nixon says.

Roberts looks worried.

“I will find some gas for you, Julie,” Nixon reassures.

And just like that, he takes off in search of gas in a country that is allegedly bone dry of gasoline.

One hour goes by. Then two, three, four.

It’s dark out now, and Roberts is at home wondering how she’s going to get out of McDonald in the morning. There has been no word from Nixon.

Finally, at 9 p.m., after an entire evening searching for gasoline, Nixon emerges with a large smile.

“I found you little gas,” he says beaming.



Courtesy of Emily Beers

In rural Haiti, proper medical care is seldom available, and small problems can become large in short order.

He never mentions how or where he found the gas, but Roberts and her friends get the feeling he went door-to-door begging anyone with any kind of gas-operated machine to donate a liter to the cause.

“Thank you so much, Gabriel,” Roberts says, gratefully. “Thank you so much.”

Nixon doesn’t hear her. He feels it’s time for him to give thanks instead.

“I understand that Haiti isn’t a good place to visit. So I’m so happy when people visit Haiti,” he says to the group. “Thank you, all of you. I will never forget your visit to McDonald. You bring us hope. We know you are thinking about our community.”

He scans the room, making eye contact with each person.

“Thank you for your help,” he adds.

Courtesy of Carey Peterson



A difficult life does not have to be an unhappy one.

"No, thank you. Thank you for your help," Roberts says, emphasizing the word "your." The group nods in agreement.

Roberts and her friends start asking Nixon about his own upbringing in St. Marc. They're trying to wrap their heads around how he ended up being such a giving person in such a torn country.

"As a boy, life was very difficult. Very, very difficult," Nixon says. "Sometimes, I couldn't buy food."

He pauses.

"But I could always help people. I'm happy when I can help people," he continues. "Life is difficult for so many people. Life is difficult for children. More than anything, they need love. And I can do that. I can give them embrace."

He carries on for a few minutes about the struggles his people must face.

"Last year, no rain. No rain, no food. Now it's difficult for people," he says.

Despite the hardships, Nixon never mentions words such as "depressed" or "unhappy" or "miserable."

Life isn't unhappy for Nixon; it's simply difficult. Life challenges his resolve; it tests his character, his resilience. But overcoming the challenges brings satisfaction. And happiness.

"I will come say goodbye in the morning before you leave," Nixon says.

He presses his hands together and smiles.

"Thank you, Julie. I'm so happy," he says. "So happy, Julie."



About the Author

*Emily Beers is a **CrossFit Journal** staff writer and editor. She competed in the 2011 Reebok CrossFit Games on CrossFit Vancouver's team, and she finished third at the Canada West Regional in 2012. In 2013, she finished second in the Open in Canada West.*