

Article submitted by Vicki Brentin for Promise for Haiti newsletter

Sunny Sharma, Past District Governor Rotary 5890, bio medical engineer and owner of a Houston medical equipment supply and repair company, always had a vision to develop a medical equipment training program that would benefit developing world nations. Rotary Club Past President and retired Methodist minister, John Collier has a long history of supporting international service projects through Rotary and his work as President of Caring Friends. He made his first trip to Haiti in the Fall of 2009 with a water and sanitation NGO. Rotary Club Past President and retired lawyer, Vicki Brentin, spent many years working for a large international humanitarian organization and also leading Rotary world community service projects. She made her first and what she expected to be her only trip to Haiti as part of a Rotary team on January 12, 2010 - arriving 45 minutes before the earthquake. Together they have led efforts to develop and launch Haiti's first formal classroom training program to teach bio-medical equipment repair.

We were inspired to develop a post earthquake project, but committed to not replicate what others were doing. We had also joined forces with a group of nurses, doctors and medical administrators with hopes that we would capitalize on the resources of Houston's renowned medical center. We insisted that a Rotary driven project had to be responsive to what Haitians communicated would be the most compelling.

In a sincere move to really listen to what Haitians were thinking, John Collier and Caring Friends invited Dr. Claude Surena, Haitian Presidential Special Appointee to coordinate Post-Quake Recovery, to visit Houston. Sunny Sharma discussed with Dr. Surena the idea of medical equipment repair training as a sustainable intervention that would empower Haitians with training, skills and knowledge. Dr. Surena plead the case multiple times over during his visit for bio medical equipment repair training. The Ministry of Health and other prominent Haitian Rotarians, including Dr. Guy Theodore, enthusiastically affirmed this suggestion that a bio medical equipment repair training program was desperately needed. Shortly thereafter, Rotarians Sunny Sharma, John Collier, Vicki and John Brentin visited numerous Haiti hospitals to assess the viability of developing a bio med training program.

Overcoming many challenges and never giving up, we rejoiced almost 2 years later when the training program was finally announced to begin at Hopital Bienfaisance on October 24, 2011 with a generous grant from the Rotary International Haiti Donor Advised Fund. We especially celebrated that we had secured Billy Teninity to be the Instructor as he was well known for his work in teaching medical equipment repair in developing world countries.

The ROTAH (Rotary Haiti Task Force) distributed applications to institutions and assisted in the selection of qualified candidates, while we anxiously

wondered if we would have enough students to fill the first class. The tuition free program would also provide food and lodging for out of town participants. We expected participants to cover their own travel to Pignon and requested that the hospitals continue to pay the salaries of their employees in the program.

Haiti's first biomedical repair training program with formal classroom instruction was designed to have four two-week sessions in Module 1. Originally classes we contemplated a maximum of 20 students, but the response was so overwhelming that we agreed to accommodate 25 students from 15 different institutions throughout Haiti. Hopital Bienfaisance provided a training room and made available a most capable and outstanding individual, Evenel Oasis who has truly been an amazing translator invaluable to the success of the program. Several staff members of Hopital Bienfaisance have been gracious with their time and resources to support the program, including Adele N. Romelus and Obed Theodore.

We were grateful and blessed to travel to Pignon in October and witness first hand the opening session. Faces were beaming. Heartfelt and joyful exclamations were flowing as these proud participants expressed their feelings about this opportunity. We were moved to tears by emotion packed statements of the aspiring technicians as we observed their spontaneous and authentic reaction when we distributed a significant set of tools to take back to their respective hospitals. Tools entrusted to their care and restricted for the repair of medical and laboratory equipment. Jo Jo, a young man that we met in September 2010 during an assessment trip, burst out, "I am going to go back home and tell everyone you did not forget us. You really came back and did what you said you were going to do." We were immensely grateful for the affirmation of investing valuable resources in the program.

With just days under their belt, already they could repair simple pieces of equipment. With the completion of the first 2-week session, these student technicians would return to their hospitals anxious and excited to demonstrate how their training would immediately benefit the hospitals that were all making sacrifices for them to participate. We had absolutely no doubt the participants would be eager and that their institutions would be enthusiastic to release them to return for session two in December.

100% of the participants returned in December for Session 2, enthusiastic for another round of training. We were equally overwhelmed by their stories of success even with their minimal training. Blood pressure cuffs and sterilizers now working and in some cases trainees used their tools and transferrable skills to successfully attempt repair of equipment they had not yet been given instruction on.

The remaining two sessions for Module 1 are scheduled for February and April. We are already planning to return in April to celebrate the success of the program with our fellow Haitian Rotarians during their annual Rotary District Conference and to also present certificates of completion to the participants. It is our hope and desire, subject to funding, that we can further enhance the program with Modules 2 and 3 for the current students and also establish a new entering class for Module 1 in the fall of 2012. We have already initiated conversations in hopes that the Ministry of Education will recognize the program.

The initial success of this program has given us such joy and hope. Not an American solution. Not a French, Canadian, German, Chinese, Cuban or any other international solution. A Haitian solution with a “hand up, not hand out” – changing the lives of Haitians with an opportunity to learn skills that will one day produce economic enterprise for them and their employers, while helping the suffering of Haiti and saving lives at the same time.