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Opus Reflection: Mercy Beyond Borders in Haiti

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Throughout my life I've had many opportunities for international travel, including to Granada and London, a Fulbright scholarship to Madrid, and a service-learning immersion trip to Nicaragua. Regardless of the location, I have always considered myself blessed to be able to experience different cultures and see the world from a different perspective. However, my time performing a site assessment in Haiti at Mercy Beyond Borders (MBB) for the Opus Prize was a particularly unique and eye-opening experience. MBB was founded more than 30 years ago by Sister Marilyn Lacey, R.S.M., with the vision that education, especially of women, is the key to overcoming the widespread corruption and poverty that has consumed Haiti and South Sudan. Through my research of the Opus Prize, I understood this site assessment was different from the typical trip to an underserved community. From the initial interview to the final trip preparations, it was made very clear that the purpose of these trips was not to do; rather, the intention was to be, to see, and to experience. It was this aspect of the Opus Prize that interested me most in the organization and its mission. There are many charitable organizations that travel to developing and underserved areas to give aid, such as building houses and providing medical goods and services. While this service work provides a certain degree of benefit to the community, I have always been somewhat hesitant about this type of altruism because it generally fails to provide long-term, sustainable change to an underlying societal problem. What happens when the volunteers leave and no one is left to provide the necessary medical services? What happens when a fire destroys a new house and there are no resources to build a new one? This traditional type of charity work seems to be a superficial bandage over a much deeper, wider wound.

The Opus Prize is different; it emphasizes six values that it seeks in the recipient of the Prize. The one that stands out to me most is sustainable change. Rather than focusing on a top-down, government-focused approach to solve global issues, Opus intentionally sponsors and supports organizations directed towards community development and cooperation. Opus understands that the resolution for profound societal problems and corruption is ultimately driven internally, not externally. As such, the Prize acknowledges individuals who are addressing the root of social issues and are striving for change that is pioneered locally.

With this in mind, I embarked on my site assessment trip to Haiti with a very different perspective and intention than my previous international travels. The first stop on our trip was in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, where we met Sr. Marilyn. Sr. Marilyn lives in California and operates MBB in both Haiti and South Sudan. She introduced us to her story and illuminated details of the work she does with MBB. Her work in Haiti revolves around empowerment and opportunity for girls and women. Extreme poverty and corruption of the educational system prevent most children from obtaining a basic education. Most primary schools are private and, as such, require tuition as well as uniforms and books. Many families cannot afford to send their children to school or can only afford to send one child. In the latter case, most families opt to send boys rather than girls because males typically have greater opportunity for success than females in Haiti. As a result, most girls in Haiti only receive up to a 1st or 2nd grade level education. Sr. Marilyn and MBB attempt to ameliorate this disparity by providing secondary school scholarships, leadership development opportunities, and a safe and supportive living environment for girls who

demonstrate academic potential. Additionally, MBB provides vocational and literacy training for women to develop skills such as reading, writing, computer skills, and baking. These skills provide women with greater independence and self-sufficiency and can even allow them to earn money through work.

The following morning we took a short flight from Ft. Lauderdale and landed in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. The contrast between our departure and arrival city, only a quick two-hour flight apart, was profound. Destitution was apparent on our short drive from the airport out of the city. Litter filled the streets; empty plots of land and stray animals ran largely unmonitored throughout the city. Sr. Marilyn explained that due to political and financial reasons, much of the rubble from the 2010 earthquake was never adequately disposed of in many of the poorer areas of the capital. As a result, many parts of the city appear recently destroyed even though the earthquake was seven years ago.



Finalists participate in a panel discussion with students

Our initial stay in Port-au-Prince was short as our first destination was Gros Morne, about a five-hour drive north of the city. Gros Morne, a town of about 35,000 people, is the community that MBB primarily serves in Haiti. Following the earthquake in 2010, Sr. Marilyn noticed that many relief efforts developed in Port-au-Prince, but many fewer resources made their way out of the city and into the more rural parts of the country. She understood that her vision for MBB in Haiti had its limitations and saw the most potential for change in a smaller community.

Our time spent in Gros Morne and the surrounding area was quick but powerful. To gain

insight into the MBB's operations and its community impact, we met with several partners and individuals associated with the organization. We were able to meet several of the girls who are a part of the educational program as well as their families and to see the personal impact that MBB has had on their lives and imagine the impact on their futures. We interviewed the principal of a primary school that hosts several of the MBB students; he had high praise for the organization, stating that many, if not all, of the students would be unable to afford their school dues if it wasn't for the support of MBB. On our final day in Gros Morne we also met with Sr. Jackie, a missionary sister who has worked in Haiti for almost two decades. She provided insight into the corruption in the Haitian political and educational systems. She explained that the private school system is largely unregulated, meaning almost anyone can start a school. This inhibits children from receiving a high-quality education and prevents those students who have the potential to succeed academically from actually achieving success. Overall, these interviews and personal interactions further highlighted the need for an organization like MBB in Haiti.

Sr. Marilyn embodies the spirit of the Opus Prize and models many of the Opus values, including sustainable change, faith, and a life of service. She understands that long-term transformation driven from within the community itself, not purely from her work, and this is what directs her vision for MBB. Sr. Marilyn demonstrates a continued commitment to sustainable change in these countries; she empowers the community through leadership training, employment opportunities, and a conscious effort to have Haitian and South Sudanese representation on her Board of Directors. A woman humble in both stature and personality, she demonstrates her love and passion for her work in Haiti and South Sudan through her relentless work. I was most impressed by her ability to understand the needs of the communities with which she works while also maintaining a realistic expectation of how many people one person and one organization such as MBB can effectively impact. Although her work may be relatively small in the scope of the vast corruption and poverty in Haiti and South Sudan, her heart is big, and it shines through in both her actions and words. HJE