

Couple refuses to be run out of adopted Haiti

O Canadians! feature spotlights Canadians making their mark on the world

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PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti - In his 26 years in Haiti, John Currelly has been kidnapped, forced with his family to flee home-invasion bandits, and found himself caught in the middle of innumerable firefights.

The Port Hope, Ont., native had to close his once-profitable fertilizer business here in the capital when farming in the Caribbean republic collapsed after the 1986 overthrow of dictator Jean-Claude Duvalier.

Despite such extreme experiences, neither Currelly nor his wife, Deb, will utter a bad word about their adopted home, and many a Haitian is thankful for their refusal to return to Canada.

As head of the Haiti arm of the Pan-American Development Foundation (PADF), Currelly is central to a bid to rebuild the severely impoverished country from the ground up.

He excitedly compares it to the way pioneers turned Canada into a prosperous and fair society. In contrast, the legacy of slavery in Haiti is one of huge economic disparity, with 78 per cent of its 8.5 million people living on less than \$2 a day.

"When Europeans arrived in Canada, they banded together to build schools and communities that they ran themselves," Currelly recounts as we drive through Port-au-Prince's chaotic streets. "But here, these people were slaves in a French feudal society where there was no trickle down.

"And, when they won their independence, they replaced that system with one just like it because that's all they had known."



CREDIT: Eduardo Munoz Alvarez / CanWest News Service

John Currelly from Canada who is the Representative Resident for Pan American Development Foundation in Haiti shows a backpack made by Haitians in the volatile neighborhood of Cite-Soleil during a visit of one of their company's projects in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. November 23, 2007.

Dictatorships and foreign intervention have loomed large ever since Haiti became the world's first black-run republic in 1804.

Our first stop is a cinderblock building in Cité-Soleil, where people at the bottom of the economic ladder are now calling the shots. It's less than a year since armed gangs held sway here, before UN forces ejected them in January.

Sun streaming through ventilation holes in one of the walls provides the only light in a room filled with paint-chipped metal chairs.

Nicole Orelus, 46, is spearheading an idea for a "basic-needs" shop, while Demostene Oxygene, 43, has successfully argued for a training centre to teach marketable skills like cooking, carpentry and welding. Projects are picked by consensus, and others include building a cyber cafe and artisan manufacture.

"We all feel like we're important people in our community," says Orelus, a mother of four, whose pristine white dress contrasts with the neighbourhood's dust and grime. Oxygene adds that the program is giving people a sense of personal responsibility.

"It's a program we saw in Brazil, and adapted for Haiti," Currelly says. Now it's taking off like wildfire in Haiti and the World Bank has promised to inject \$15 million to implement it nationally.

STREET-CLEANING PROJECT

Currelly is also keen to extract development dividends from a street-cleaning project Pan-American Development Foundation runs, mainly with funds from the U.S. government.

Workers are replaced every two months to ensure more people get a chance to benefit from the program. There are applicants galore, despite the brief duration and daily pay of \$2.

"I'm very happy to be cleaning up the country," says Louis-Antoinette Severe, 38, revealing a missing front tooth as she smiles. Poor or not, she doesn't "want to live in dirt."

Currelly confides he wasn't keen to take on the \$14-million, 30-month-long project, since it strays from PADF's philosophy of promoting wealth creation over poverty reduction.

While street cleaning is more cosmetic service than economic building block, it's nevertheless "quick impact" -- and that's what's additionally attractive to donors.

"If we can set the stage for the municipality or private sector to take this on, then we'll have a development gain," Currelly says.

He's especially proud of a program in which PADF upgraded a mountain road to

help farmers who grow pumpkins for Haiti's famous "soup joumou" reduce waste.

"Before the road improvement, they lost 40 per cent of their crop carrying it down in buckets on the backs of donkeys," he says. "Now it's trucked down, and they lose one per cent."

The Currellys, both 59, didn't appear destined for aid work as he grew up on the family farm in Canton, Ont., and she in nearby Port Hope.

The couple's parents had been friends, so they've known each other "forever." From sandbox sweethearts, they married at 20. They were farming when John and his brother Ben started the fertilizer business in Port Hope. During that time, John and Deb adopted the Baha'i faith, which emphasizes internationalism.

They moved to Haiti in 1981 with their children, Read, 9, and Alice, 7, because it was "close to home, yet far away culturally," and adopted Jocelyn Pierre, a 14-year-old Haitian, in 1994.

Despite continued success of the fertilizer business in Canada, sales in Haiti plunged 80 per cent amid the post-Duvalier economic collapse. John Currelly turned to business consulting which exposed him to development work. Nothing, it appears, has since deterred him or Deb from it.

UNSOPHISTICATED KIDNAPPERS

The kidnapping happened in May 2005, and Alice, fluent in Creole, played a key role in negotiating for her father's release.

Five gunmen had snatched him, and one called to say they'd decapitate him and drop his head at a church unless they got \$500,000.

Alice said the family had \$6,000, much of it rushed over by people wishing to help, but the gunman revealed the gang's amateurism by saying: "That's not even a quarter of what we're asking."

More evidence of their lack of sophistication came as Alice explained the importance of negotiating with just one of the gunmen, because they'd all been grabbing the phone.

She needed a name to ask for, and when the kidnapper selected refused to give his, Alice suggested calling him "George." That really confused matters.

"He said, 'I'm not George,'" Currelly recalls. "And Alice said, 'We'll just make believe.' And he repeated he wasn't George. And this went on and on."

But there was nothing funny about what Currelly endured. At different times, the gang choked him to unconsciousness, put a pistol he didn't know was empty to his head and pulled the trigger, and fired a gun behind him.

Currelly figured he'd had it when Alice hung up after one of the gunmen called her a "bitch." But she'd known what she was doing: the other gang members accused their cohort of messing up.

They released Currelly 16 hours later, following delivery of an undisclosed sum.

HOME INVASION

On another occasion, the family and a visiting friend had to scurry over the garden wall as eight gunmen stormed their house and began shooting at them, before ransacking the place.

But yet another scare would remind the couple that Haiti is never short of surprises for them.

Stranded after her car broke down the night of a party, Deb Currelly took a "tap-tap" -- Haiti's low-cost transport that comes to a halt when riders tap the walls to get off. But the way home required a transfer near Cite-Soleil. "The place was crawling with grungy men, and I was all dolled up," she recalls.

Suddenly a pickup truck arrived and inside was a man she knew: her husband had fired him for being violent. Even so, he drove her straight home. "He refused money," she says.

"This is the Haitian mentality."

The couple put their adopted son's sister, Darlene, through school and, with Haitian rapper Wyclef Jean, launched a group home for three street children.

Their commitment to Haiti is complete: they've just bought a plot of land for their retirement home.

"It's always been a learning experience here," says Deb. "We feel a lot like family now."

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