

Maternal Health Program

Class Begins for Second Group of Haitian Midwifery Students

By Nadene Brunk, CNM, MSM, with gratitude to all of you who support us through HHCF

March 9, 2009 was a red-letter day for Midwives for Haiti, the nonprofit organization that's training women as skilled birth attendants. It marked the beginning of the second class of Haitian women to whom midwives will teach life-saving midwifery skills.

First stop for my colleague Ob/Gyn Stephen Eads with Virginia Women's Center of Richmond, Wendy Dotson of Loudon Community Midwives in Leesburg, Virginia and me was Ste. Thérèse Hospital. Awaiting us were six neatly dressed and eager future midwives who were also were thrilled and nervous at the same time. (By the end of the day, there were nine women.) Their instructors had many of the same feelings.

As we put out the supplies for each student -- two texts in Creole, notebooks and pens, gestational wheels and tapes, blood pressure cuffs and stethoscopes, pink scrubs and black bags -- I could not help but think about how we started the first class: with none of this. That class was held under the trees at Pandiassou with no recognition from the area health administration, no curriculum and no compass.

Midwives for Haiti began in the fall of 2006 with facts provided by the World Health Organization (WHO): Women and babies die in Haiti from lack of access to health care and the most significant difference could be made by the presence of a skilled birth attendant.

But after two years and numerous struggles, we graduated our first class. Two of the midwives were hired by Zamni Lasante, the Haitian arm of Partners in Health (PIH), an international health and social justice organization founded by Paul Farmer, M.D. (Farmer's work is the subject of Tracy Kidder's 2003 book *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, A Man Who Would Cure the World*) These two grads work in a rural clinic in Cerca la Source delivering prenatal care and babies. Another graduate works for Medical Missionaries in Thomassique. Two more have been hired by the state-owned Ste. Therese hospital to work the night shift. (Previously, the housekeeper and one untrained nurse performed "after hours" deliveries.) These same two midwives and another graduate also run a prenatal clinic at the Whitney clinic in Hinche. One other student went to Port-au-Prince for additional education. We lost one student to a disabling stroke, and one was waylaid by family illness and pregnancy but plans to finish her skills checklist this year.

The journey to get to this special day included meetings with Raoul Raphael, M.D., of the Ministry of Health, Father Jacques Volcius of the Catholic organization Caritas, the Bishop of Hinche (before his retirement), a Partners In Health midwife, a representative of the WHO and the president of the Association of Infirmière Sage Femmes (trans.: hospital midwives. The French word for midwife, sage femmes, translates as wise women.) We also sent countless letters and e-mails to our supporters and detractors in the U.S. We formed an advisory board. More than 30 U.S. midwives, four doctors and a medical student traveled back and forth to Haiti to assist with the project.

Our journey also would not have been possible without the Haitian Health Care Foundation, who supported us financially, taught us important lessons about the culture, held us up in prayer and reminded us of our responsibility to a higher power.

We have earned the respect of each of these organizations in Haiti and it is important that we continue to work to maintain high standards for our students. For example, both Caritas and Zamni Lasante sent

candidates for the second class. However in deference to the Ministry of Health, we accepted only those with diplomas from government-approved nursing schools.

In the fall of 2008, we embarked upon an expensive but necessary process of choosing a Haitian midwife with university background to teach for us full-time. At the beginning of the new year we started training two teachers and then let one go because of unmet standards. During January and February we completed the training of Danise Delva, ISF, (Infirmière Sage Femme) a competent and motivated woman who will live at the rectory in Hinche while working for us full-time. She has improved the curriculum and exams and cemented relationships with government officials and hospital administration. She has a schedule mapped out of class time and clinical rotations that should yield midwives in six months.

So there was no wonder that when the students took their places around the table several weeks ago for the first day of their "Sage Femmes Pour Ayiti [Haiti]" class, we were feeling very blessed. One student led a prayer and then all began singing "How Great Thou Art" in Creole. While our Creole and English words blended in song, few American eyes were dry. Each woman will touch hundreds of women in her lifetime with compassion, education and access to a safe delivery of a healthy baby and family.