

# RSCJ in Haiti Stay the Course

## Amid conflict, people grateful for their presence

By Pamela Schaeffer

In early February, RSCJ across the United States watched and worried as political tensions in Haiti, simmering for at least two years, erupted into violence. RSCJ in Mexico, Canada, Puerto Rico and Cuba were no less concerned. These are the five provinces that sponsor a four-year-old foundation in Verrettes, Haiti, where four RSCJ – Judy Vollbrecht and Diane Roche from the United States, Josefa Corrada from Puerto Rico and Matilde Moreno from Spain – live among the people and offer programs for children. Verrettes is a small town in the Artibonite Valley, an agricultural region in west-central Haiti.

The governments of the United States, Canada, Mexico and France were among those urging citizens to leave. RSCJ in Haiti, though, were opposed to abandoning Haitian neighbors and friends and educational programs so hopefully begun. Further, Verrettes, apparently of minimal strategic importance in the conflict, remained relatively calm. Evacuation would have required traveling through areas in the forefront of international news, where the conflict had erupted into chaos and violence. Though supplies were short, and many businesses and schools were closed, to stay seemed safer than to leave.

Sister Vollbrecht, who has lived in Haiti from the beginning of the mission, noted that their Haitian

*Haiti, the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere, is just 600 miles off U.S. shores.*

*Sister Judy Vollbrecht, left, on a visit to New Orleans in 2002. She has been in Verrettes since the beginning of the RSCJ foundation in 2000.*

*Sister Josefa Corrada, center, reads with students.*

*Right, a Haitian child in Verrettes.*

Photo of Sister Judy Vollbrecht: by Jennifer Zdon  
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*Only 65 percent of children are enrolled in primary schools.*

friends had responded favorably to their decision. She has become all too aware of Haiti's history: relentless poverty and political instability – thirty violent coups since Haiti became the world's first black republic in 1804. "When we bring communion to the sick, as we do every Sunday, people are so grateful," she wrote in an e-mail in mid-March. "They need a chance to pray for the country ... to experience that God has not abandoned them in spite of all that is happening. They continually pray in thanksgiving for us because we left our countries to come to Haiti."

Still, conditions were unusually harsh. An e-mail from Sister Diane Roche, who had decided to join the group in Verrettes and had arrived just three weeks earlier, described the effect of the conflict on supplies. "The four of us are sitting in our dining room after our evening meal of cereal and the homemade cottage cheese Matilde has learned to make with powdered milk," she wrote. "Not a day has gone by that some person with whom we have worked over the past three years hasn't shared a story of lost work, sickness, hunger or death. The children who come to our gate often make up stories about dead mothers or other tragedies in the hope that we will soften our 'no giving out food at the gate' rule. But their hunger is not fabricated. ... Occasionally (as in the case of two severely malnourished children who have the characteristic reddish tinge to their hair that indicates 'kwashiorkor' – protein malnutrition – and are about a third the size and weight they ought to be at their age) we break our own rule.

“I feel as if I am on a powerful sailboat with full sails, leaning backward to keep the boat from tipping over,” Sister Roche wrote. She said she was worried that the effort in Verrettes would be uprooted “in the whirlwind.”



The RSCJ presence in Haiti goes back nearly two decades. First, Puerto Rican sisters went to give theological workshops to religious women in Haiti and to acquire grant money for poor schools in the mountains near Verrettes. Two RSCJ from the United States also became deeply involved – Anita Von Wellsheim, who helped a grassroots group called Fonkoze with their small loan program for the poor, and Virginia McMonagle, who spent years working with orphans and a hospital for infants, *Nos Petits Frères et Soeurs*. As these religious returned home and talked about the needs, the idea of a foundation in Haiti began to take root. After several visits to Haiti, the provincials of the United States, Canada, Puerto Rico and Mexico (with Cuba joining later) decided such a mission would be a fitting gift for Saints Madeleine Sophie Barat and Philippine Duchesne to mark the bicentennial of the Society in 2000.

Recently, Sister Roche, perhaps in an effort to put the reality she was facing in perspective, wrote a brief history of the mission's early days.

*The first group of three RSCJ – Inés Calderón of the Puerto Rican province, Josefa Corrada, and Judy Vollbrecht – arrived in Verrettes in 2000 and set up residence in a simple little house on one of the central streets of the town. The plan was to live in the midst of the people... I have seen the house and can understand why people were so sad to have to move. The neighbors were our lifeline, helping us learn Kreyol and*



*The average per capita income is \$425 a year.*



*Far left, Sister Matilde Moreno displays art work from a project with Haitian children.*

*Left, a Haitian man rides his bicycle in the Artibonite region of Haiti while carrying a basket of rice on his head.*

Photo: Thony Belizaire/Agence France Presse.

*understand the customs of the country. They still greet us like family whenever we walk down our old street.*

*We moved into our present house last March. By this time Matilde Moreno had arrived from Spain, and her homemaking instincts helped convert the weary little building into a decent and attractive home for us. It was no small task because, although the house had been well designed and constructed, it had been used as a rooming house for four families, who cooked in their rooms. ...*

*Today the house is as attractive as any RSCJ community. The walls are cinderblock finished in stucco and painted yellow. The floors are smooth cement ... We have great windows that have screens in them so we get to take advantage of every little breeze... .*

*We cook, using two solar ovens when it is sunny or on an indoor stove in our little cook house in the back yard, which is powered by bottled gas. We have a fridge that operates on both gas and electricity, depending on what we have available. Occasionally we do have Haitian electricity, but it is poorly regulated and sometimes causes damage to bulbs and appliances, so we haven't been using it lately. Instead, we have been living 'off the grid,' using the six solar panels installed on our roof. We also have running cold water most of the time and a septic tank of sorts in the back yard.*

*And of course we have a satellite antenna that allows us to receive and send e-mail.*

*All these things mean that our standard of living is much higher than the average in Verrettes ... [though]*

*continued*

*Only a quarter of the population has access to safe drinking water.*

a few homes are even more comfortable than ours (with air conditioning and generators, for example).

When we need bread, we walk to the local bakery, which produces simple white rolls every morning. Everyone in town eats them, and they are sold at other markets for miles around. For fruits, vegetables, eggs and some staples, like sugar, rice and flour, we go to the local open air market where we bargain like everyone else with the women selling wares. For other things, we go to St. Marc or Port-au-Prince. In a pinch, we can get almost anything we need at one of the little stores in town. But since everything has to be transported by truck to Verrettes, it costs more here.

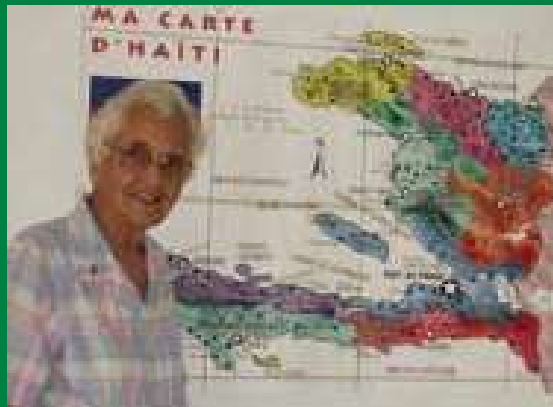
At first glance, the town looks pretty worn down. There is political graffiti on most of the walls. The little town square is nothing but dust. . . . Most buildings have cracks in them or are in need of paint or are half finished. Only two roads are paved. But after a week or so, you begin to notice how much actually works here. The Catholic church is in great shape, and several Protestant churches have attractive buildings. A system of canals brings water into the town for drinking and irrigation. There are two huge Catholic schools, one run by sisters, the other by brothers. These are state schools, so the kids who get in don't have to pay much. In addition there must be at least fifty other private schools, which range from lean-tos with benches to real buildings with playing fields and computers. There are two radio stations, an internet café, a gas station, a simple movie theater, a trade school, a residence for poor kids from the mountains . . . a factory that makes ice, a place that sells tanks of propane, and a host of other small businesses.

And of course there is our Choukon, an open-air pavilion we began building two years ago on a piece of land owned by the church. It has four latrines, two showers, a kitchen, storage space and a guardian's room. Since it is halfway up a small hill, it gets a nice breeze all day long, which makes it possible to run our summer program when the temperatures are often in the high 90s all day long. . . .

**Approximately  
65 percent of  
Haitians  
cannot read.**

Left, Sister Anita Von Wellsheim stands in front of a map of Haiti. From her home at Kenwood Convent of the Sacred Heart in Albany, she works with Fonkoze, a program that supports grassroots economic development in Haiti. Right, map of Haiti. Verrettes is north of Port-au-Prince. Inset shows Haiti's location in relation to the United States.

Map: AFP Spanish Graphics Service



**Average life  
expectancy is 49  
years for men, 54  
years for women.**



By March 10, though the political situation remained unsettled, life was improving in Verrettes. "Some of the people who left are beginning to come back," Sister Vollbrecht wrote. "Schools opened this week. So did the bank. The telephone company, the cyber café and the gas stations are still down, but the word is that they have gas now in Port-au-Prince, so we should be getting it soon." Meanwhile, Sister Roche had given two workshops in conflict resolution to the young men and women who assist the RSCJ in their programs and had met with young women exploring potential vocations to religious life.



In normal times, as normal as it gets in the poorest country in the western hemisphere, the RSCJ operate an after-school program for children three days a week, helping them with homework and providing informal tutoring. The sisters also operate a summer camp for young children and help older children develop leadership skills by using them as assistants.

Responding to questions about the RSCJ presence in Haiti, Sister Vollbrecht reflected in a recent e-mail on changes in people over time.

*[Soon after we arrived] we noticed children passing by our house every day carrying buckets of water on their heads, and we began inviting them into our chapel to say hello to Jesus. They were dirty, ragged, often barefoot, and enchanting. They carefully put down their buckets, slipped off their sandals if they had them, and came in. We taught them songs; we prayed; they left. They returned with friends and started knocking on the door and calling for us. Our neighbors told them to go away, and sometimes beat them, saying they were dirty and should know better than to disturb the sisters like that. Little by little they began to understand that we didn't want the kids to go away, that Jesus loved them just as they were, and we would welcome them even if they hadn't bathed and put on clean clothes. Gradually they accepted that and wanted their own children to come too. Now, three years later, we see the changes in the children, some of whom are now adolescents.*

Among them are Tigana, a boy of twelve or thirteen when he first met the RSCJ. He was a slow learner who was often getting into fights.

*But when we asked him to do something, he was pleased and proud, and began coming regularly to check the water tank on top of the house and clean it out, or go to the market with us, or help carry propane gas cylinders for our stove and refrigerator. Sometimes we had to send him away for a week or two when he would not behave. ... Today he is a young man of sixteen ... and is back in school. He has a positive sense of himself and tries to tell the younger children how to do things. ... He still has trouble reading and writing, but is good with mechanical things. He comes to us when he is in trouble, and we help him sort things out.*

*Another is Oudi. He must have been nine when we first met him, but he looked about five. He was a tiny child, obviously malnourished, with big eyes filled with fear and emptiness. ... We went into the chapel, and*



**Women die in childbirth at 70 times the rate in the United States.**



*Far left, Haitian children are fed as part of the sisters' program in Verrettes.*

*Left, the sisters' new home made of cinderblock finished in stucco and painted yellow.*

*we asked him what things he wanted to thank God for in his life. He said only, "Mwen grangou" – I'm hungry.*

*After all the advice we had received about not giving food or money, we had a big struggle. How could we send a kid like that away with nothing? We left him in the chapel and had a community meeting. Finally, we gave him some rice and onions and oil to take home and cook.*

*It's been a long journey for Oudi, but he's getting there. His eyes are no longer fearful or blank. He is at the head of his class in second grade, and our twin parish in Michigan has agreed to pay for him to attend a more challenging school.*

*There are changes in the adults too, and in ourselves.*

*The Haitians have changed most notably in the domain of discipline. It is a time-honored custom here to beat children who misbehave. ... We pointed to the example of Jesus ... and said that if they were to help us with the children, they must live by that principle. It was a big struggle for most of them ... but they are learning to listen to the children and encourage them. One man who has three children told us he used to beat them all the time, but he doesn't anymore.*

*As for ourselves ... little by little we are able to enter into the structures of life here. We still have much to learn, but we pray that our lives and work here will help change attitudes of fear and mistrust to attitudes of cooperation and hope. ❖*

**About 12 percent of children die before age 5.**