



IN DECEMBER 2012 ON OUR WAY TO PESTEL. IN THE PHOTO OUR DRIVER, ELIDIA AND MARIUS

Elidia's Story

by Robers Dolciné



When two elephants fight the grass suffer.

African proverb

When we took the trail of the remote southern village passed the city of Jacmel going east toward Cayes-Jacmel, it was after three hours of driving through the rugged La Selle mountain range that stands between Port-au-Prince and the southern coastline of the southern peninsula which with the northern peninsula forms the two relatively large and mountainous geographical formations that lay west on the Island of Hispaniola. We call them the Republic of Haiti. In the east lies the Dominican Republic. It is exactly that connection

between the two countries that constitutes the heart of our story.

First a little geopolitical background information. In the Sixties, our great and powerful neighbor, the United States of America had found it a much more reliable economic strategy to invest in the sugar plantations of the DR than in Haiti. Size was a factor in their choice. The DR has twice the land mass of Haiti. The plains there are more suited for mass production of the sugarcane. They seem to be much larger than those of Haiti. We are a mountainous land; that is what the name "Haiti" means in the former Taino Indian language. But still Haitians are hard workers, so well trained are we by two hundred years of French cruel domination and slavery. Because of that and the fact Dominicans always look down on cutting sugarcane as a work that is only deserving of beasts. So at the end of the fifties and through the sixties the sugarcane industry was choked in Haiti in order to force Haitian workers to, by state's decision, cross the border to the DR to go work in the more flourishing sugarcane plantations there. They did en masse, mostly recruited by the Haitian government, others went voluntarily, and still others were simply abducted from border villages just like in the old days of the abject slaves' trade.

Our young friend, daughter, protégé Elidia is a casualty of the devilish game of starving one population to profit another for strictly capitalist economic reasons. We, the whole Dolcine family left Port-au-Prince early in the

ZOOM IN UP CLOSE



June 2014

FOCUS ON JENNIFER ELIDIA JEAN

morning at around 5 o'clock. I told Elidia the day before that tomorrow will be her day. She could make herself as beautiful as she wanted to be. And beautiful she indeed made herself. She chose among her best dresses and borrow a large fancy hat from the family collection. As we took the footpath trail, leaving the truck behind and seeing how remote that little village was, again I approached her and said to her: "God truly loves you. And I also believe that we are very blessed to know you."



First, we went to pay due respect to Losie, the lady that helped Elidia eight years earlier when she brought her to Port-au-Prince. Then Elidia asked me: "Can I go and visit Matant" ("My Aunt" - amazing that she was still calling that witch her Auntie after all she has been through!).

Eleven years prior to 2004 when we took her on that reckoning journey, another auntie, her mom's sister asked for permission to take her to the DR. That auntie and her boyfriend left Tomonde in the Central Plateau, came to Port-au-Prince, picked her up from another mom's sister house in the Delmas 6 suburb west of the Capital. The three headed to Jacmel where it would take them about a two day hike in the mountains through the La Selle Forest, which is with the Macaya Forest further southwest, one of the two remnant of rainforests in Haiti. The journey

if it rained would be a grueling one and Elidia about 10 years old at that time. She would have been a hindrance for the two travelers. The man convinced her auntie to leave her with some acquaintances of theirs while they tried to make it to the DR and probably intended to come back at one point to take her from there another time. However, little did they know that while they were going toward their land of promise, the little girl that they left behind would suffer hell.

I sat down in the yard of my mother-in-law's house listening with tears in my eyes, a sense of revolt and hatred in my heart toward those people when Elidia recounted her misery as she was helping with the house chores. She said that the people that her aunt left her with would had her to work on their fields like a zombie-slave. If she dared show signs of fatigue they would stone her. At night with the men in the house she never felt safe. In the summer, she recalled that was the only time that she was able to have fun with kids her age. Yet, even then, at the end of one summer she committed the insolence of asking the lady to send her to school like the other children that were playing with her. The response was the most inhumane that I had heard my whole life. "Sending you to school?" The witch responded. "You see those little pigs that I have there, they have a better chance than you to go to school."

That was the crucial moment when Elidia brought her case to Losie, the lady that we visited first as we entered the village that morning of 2004. As one would expect, she was appalled by her neighbor's unwillingness to send the girl to school and her extreme arrogance in comparing the little girl to her pigs. Losie resolved in her heart to get even. But having no family ties with Elidia either Losie could not simply remove her from the situation of mistreatment. There was a child welfare program in Haiti but it existed only by name. For a domestic child, like Elidia, there was absolutely no recourse other than a Good Samaritan nearby like Losie, who would be willing to risk her very life to help her. No government functionary will venture in such a remote village to save a poor little, no-name girl like Elidia. However, what Losie lacked in natural rights to do something, she had in bravery, compassion and self-denial.

Let's call it "Operation Deliverance". Elidia was to wake up very early (that would not be

unusual at all. That was part of her normal work schedule) on the appointed day. The two left the village. Losie's initial plan was to take the girl to her sister Marlene in the suburb of Martissant in Port-au-Prince. But when the adrenaline settled and she realized what she had gotten herself into she changed her mind and decided that she will go to her sister only to take advice on where Elidia could stay. That was exactly what was done; and Elidia ended up at my in-laws'. All she knew was her name and a vague idea of where her other aunt lives in Port-au-Prince. I guessed her age at around 13 years then. I also vowed to help her find her family even if we should go and knock at every door in and around Delmas 6 where she believed that her aunt lived in the Capital.

It was a Sunday when my wife Maguy, Elidia and I set out to try the impossible task of finding someone in the Delmas 6 region with no house number to go by. About six doors down the road a young lady remembered her

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and after a few more ins and outs into other addresses we found her "uncle", her auntie's husband. They were separated and living in different ends of town. When we finally met her auntie near the dangerous region of Cite Soleil a few miles away from where we initially started, that was unfortunately the moment when she learned of her mother's passing. When Elidia inquired about her sister, she was abruptly informed of her death as well. Elidia did not cry. She was sad, confused and lonely. The lady invited Elidia to stay with her. Elidia categorically refused. Later on I asked her why. She said her sister was living with that auntie and she was not sure of how she died, she would not make the mistake of living with those people.

Eight years later, I invited her to take that pilgrimage, to go back to that village where she was considered less than the little pigs in the witch yard. We sat at the porch in front

of Losie's little house, that brave woman who was the first in a string of angels that God put on Elidia's path to help and sustain her with love, patience and respect. Elidia was then on the verge of finishing high school in Haiti. She was 21ish. We told her that we would continue to support her as long as she wanted to go to school. If she chose to be a doctor, we would stand by her.

She entered the witch's yard and said "Bonjour." The old lady was sitting on a large chair like a Nubian queen. Elidia said "It seems that my auntie does not remember me." "Oh! You know my child, my children have a lot of friends who come and visit in the area, I just thought you could be one of them." "No, auntie, Elidia replied, I am Elidia!" "What?" Had this old lady had any heart condition she would have fallen dead from her seat. She sat there speechless for a long while. No word to express her surprise. The person that she thought was less than a little pig was back to visit as elegant as any other young girl her age.

Jennifer Elidia Jean is now in charge of the Grace Corps administration in Port-au-Prince since the January 2010 earthquake. She is a seamstress, a cosmetologist and one of the best cooks that I know of in Haiti. Still very shy. But, I and the rest of the family would tell you she has come a long way.

The rebuilding of the school that she actually attended a few years earlier would have been impossible without her. She was in charge of everything and now a good part of what we do in Haiti rest on her shoulders.

Grace Corps works with a minimum of 32 schools in Haiti. We support education for children in the countryside and poor neighborhoods of Port-au-Prince. We provide free teachers' training in some of the remotest areas of the country. Since 2005 our work has suffered a number of setbacks that make it very difficult for us to reach our goal of providing good schooling for Haitian kids regardless of where they live. For more information on what we do and how you can help please visit our website www.gracecorps.org or write to us at gracecorps@live.com.

We believe in what we do.
Our actions proclaim our
determination.

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. John 15:1-27