

From Vacation to Vision

## FOUR DECADES OF HOPE FOR HAITI'S CHILDREN

by Rachel Mills and Alison Kern



*Grace Children's Hospital receives thousands of children annually who are suffering from tuberculosis and other diseases.*

As with the other ports-of-call, the vacationers aboard the ship were looking forward to sunning themselves on the powdery white sand, snorkeling, and shopping for local handicrafts. Among the travelers on the cruise that day were Jim and Virginia Snavley of LaPorte, Indiana. Eager to enjoy this slice of Caribbean bliss, the Snavleys had no idea that this stop would change the course of their lives forever.

Unlike the other cruise destinations, there was something about this island that intrigued the Snavleys. They weren't content just to relax on the beach, so Jim and Virginia decided to explore beyond

the security fencing. As they walked farther from the seashore, the turquoise ocean turned to rivers of raw sewage, and the pristine sand became dirt on rough, unpaved roads. For the first time, the Snavleys experienced the reality of Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

As they wandered the streets of Haiti's capital city, they were overcome by what they saw. The Snavleys had never witnessed such extreme poverty and quickly realized why Haiti was unquestionably the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. Walking through the city streets, they were surrounded by sprawling slums and impoverished dwellings. Port-au-Prince was

nothing like the touristy façade of the beachfront they had left just minutes before. What began as a vacation became a mission of love as the Snavleys heard the first whispers of God's call to serve "the least of these" in Haiti.

### **A Hospital for Children**

Not long after that first visit, the Snavleys decided to sell their farm, pack up their three kids and all their possessions, and move to Haiti. Compelled by their faith, they opened a small clinic in Port-au-Prince for children suffering from tuberculosis (TB), a leading cause of death in Haiti. They wrote to their Methodist friends in North

America, sharing their vision to restore health and hope to Haitian children and their families.

It was not long before two of those friends, pastors Grayson Atha and Jim Martin, began to lead the first mission "tours" to the island, bringing dedicated churchgoers from Indiana, Ohio, and Michigan to see the budding projects in Haiti. With financial support from these friends and the United Methodist Advance program, the Snavleys moved forward in prayer and determination. In 1967, they officially opened Grace Children's Hospital, dedicated to the treatment of children with tuberculosis. A US nonprofit organization, International Child Care (ICC), was established to receive donations from Americans and send them along to the programs on the island.

At the encouragement of General Board of Global Ministries leaders in New York, and with the support of the US board members, ICC formed a local board of directors in Haiti to oversee the work of the organization. Even from these early days, empowerment and sustainability were at the core of ICC's mission philosophy. The Snavleys sought to work alongside the people of Haiti and hired many of their staff members from the area of Port-au-Prince where they were working.

By the mid-1970s, it became clear to the Snavleys and the ICC staff that in order to truly control the spread of tuberculosis, they had to look beyond the inpatients at Grace Children's Hospital. They needed to reach out to other family members who suffered from this highly contagious disease. Rev. Atha recalls how, for many people at that time, "the coughing disease" was a death sentence. People who had TB were banned from the family home and sent to a little shack behind the



*Medical staff at the Grace Children's Hospital diligently administer care to children to restore their good health.*

house to die. ICC addressed this problem by embarking on a preventative tuberculosis-control program called the Crusade Against Tuberculosis. After early forays into a variety of other projects, such as importing surplus food to Haiti, "finally we decided we should do one thing well—the treatment for and prevention of TB," Atha said. "To say yes to that meant saying no to a lot of other things."

So with the blessing of the Haitian Ministry of Health and advice from the World Health Organization, ICC developed a nationwide campaign to diagnose and treat TB throughout Haiti. ICC also opened an outpatient clinic at

Grace Children's Hospital to test and treat adults and children with milder cases of tuberculosis. With a shift in emphasis to outpatient care, inpatient services were intentionally reduced and reserved only for those children with the most advanced cases of TB.

#### **Programs for Prevention**

By the early 1980s, International Child Care had developed a reputation for solid expertise in TB control and was contracted by the Ministry of Health as its principal partner in the National Tuberculosis Program. At that time, ICC had completed a mass immunization campaign, systematically vaccinating more than 3 million



*In 1968, Virginia Snavley and a gravely ill child in Haiti.*



James and Virginia Snavley and their children.

Over the years, ICC has intentionally increased the capacity of local systems and people to provide the services and resources to sustain its work in Haiti. In keeping with this philosophy of sustainable development and local empowerment, in 2002, for the first time since ICC's inception, all of the personnel in Haiti, from the highest administrative and professional levels to the support staff, are Haitian.

#### **Sustainable Development**

The idea of sustainable development is not limited to those working in the "mission field," however. As someone who has been involved with ICC since the very first mission tour to visit Grace Children's Hospital in January 1968, the Rev. Sue Northcraft has noticed a corresponding change in the attitudes of North Americans toward missionary projects. "It used to be that people saw helping the Haitians as an impossible task," said Northcraft. "Then, when they began to see the results coming out of Grace Children's Hospital, they started to give more enthusiastically. I saw the attitude change from 'We're going to go do this for them' to 'We're going to support them as they do this for

themselves.'" Northcraft is also a strong proponent of mission trips because she has witnessed the lasting impact they have on the participants. Many of the people she has traveled to Haiti with have gone on to become pastors or have remained dedicated to mission work throughout their lives.

For those who visit Grace Children's Hospital today, it's easy to see why it is recognized as one of the leading pediatric hospitals in Haiti. The hospital provides inpatient and clinic-based care for children with HIV/AIDS, malnutrition, and other diseases as well as continuing its original emphasis on tuberculosis. A major advancement in the care of HIV-positive patients at Grace Children's Hospital came in early 2005, when, thanks to partnerships with the US Agency for International Development, the Center for Disease Control, and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria, ICC inaugurated antiretroviral medical treatment for children and adults with HIV/AIDS. In addition, the outpatient services offered at Grace Children's Hospital have expanded to include a general pediatric clinic and a new, state-of-the-art eye clinic with surgical capacity. On average, 300 patients are treated each day through the outpatient services at Grace Children's Hospital. Northcraft said, "Everything we do to improve the health of the Haitian children relates to our goal of eliminating TB

### **United Methodists have contributed \$2,205,460 to Grace Children's Hospital over the past 10 years.**

as a major health problem in Haiti."

ICC has come a long way from that day more than 40 years ago when Jim and Virginia Snavley first saw the little children dying on the streets of Port-au-Prince and felt God tugging at their hearts to do something. The impact of their journey, which began as a vacation and grew into a vision, has been remarkable. Virginia put it best in one of her letters to friends back home: "The death wail has been dimmed for us by the clapping and singing of children given their chance to live.... Healed children have gone from Grace Children's Hospital back to their homes knowing that Jesus cares for them in their world and that He has riches awaiting them in the next. We have been very privileged to share in the beginnings of what we see developing into a great blessing to the children of Haiti."

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#### **A Note of Thanks from Keith Mumma**

The blessings that Grace Children's Hospital has provided for the past 40 years would not be possible without the generosity and support of United Methodists like you and me, who have given to Advance projects like Grace Children's Hospital (#418520-7) for so long. On behalf of the millions of children who have been cared for over the years, I would like to say a sincere "Thank you." It is my hope that as long as there are children in need, there will be United Methodists ready to answer God's call to serve "the least of these."

*Keith Mumma is the ICCUSA National Director and a member of Stockbridge United Methodist Church in Kalamazoo, Michigan.*