

How do I begin to describe my first visit to Haiti?



MARK & JENNIFER CROW,
Pastors, Victory Church
Oklahoma City

It begins with Danita Estrella, my friend of several years. And I will tell you, although the surrounding area is barren, the grass is green inside the walls of Hope for Haiti Children's Center.

I will never forget the first time I heard of Danita Estrella. I read about her in a 2001 *Charisma* magazine article. Tears ran down my cheeks as I read the story of one brave, dark-eyed, tiny, blond woman of Puerto Rican descent who by herself, moved to Ouanaminthe, Haiti, to be a missionary. She started out by living in a tin-roofed house which was available for missionary doctors to use in neighboring

Dominican Republic. She wasn't a missionary doctor, but she used the house until she established her plan.

When I read how she had been sleeping under her sheets in case the rats fell on her head in the night, and then how she slept in a school while praying and asking God to lead her to what work He had for her to do, I said to myself, *I must meet this woman.*

When I read how Danita grabbed the shirt of a strong Dominican to rescue a Haitian orphan boy who was being beaten with a cattle whip because he was begging for food outside an open-air restaurant where she was eating, I took the article to my husband, Mark, with tears, and said to him, **"We must help this woman."** At that time, she had around 26 orphans.

As God would have it, we found out that we had a mutual acquaintance who wound up inviting us to meet Danita. At that first meeting in 2001, my husband was able to give her a gift from our church to help her build a second floor onto the Hope for Haiti orphanage.

Danita became a friend and visited us in our home several times. And, eventually, my husband went to see the Hope for Haiti facilities, and after that we helped her with many more projects. We prayed with her and sent help when her HIV positive children could not get the medicine they needed. Once we sent a team to help her bring 26 orphans from the hurricane-ravaged coast, a 10-hour drive away to a safe haven at Hope for Haiti.



BUS WITH 26 ORPHANS

And again, we helped secure medical care for a terminally ill infant who needed an operation in the United States to enable him to continue living.



But never until recently had I been able to travel to Haiti myself to see where my beautiful friend lives.

Danita met us at the airport in Puerto Plata, Dominican Republic, to drive us the three hours to the Haitian border. I rode with her in her little truck while the rest of my family and another family traveling with us rode in the bus which she had secured to carry the other 9 people and the 10 large suitcases filled with gifts for the kids at the orphanage including 148 pairs of new shoes, two new laptop computers, band instruments (two trumpets, a clarinet, a saxophone, a flute), 20 teddy bears and 3 suitcases full of candy.

Nothing they said could have helped me imagine the picture that I saw when I stepped out of that truck.

She tried to warn us about what to expect when we crossed the border. And, my husband tried to warn me about what I was going to see in the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, but nothing they said could have prepared me for what I saw when I crossed the border.



The best way that I can think of to describe what I saw is by saying that **it felt like we stepped into an elaborate movie set that was so well-done that every detail was distressed, disheveled, destroyed with just the right amount of perfect detail.** It did not help that a tornado had just ravaged the muddy riverbed area of the border right near the orphanage, leaving enormous

trees uprooted against the dirt landscape, making it look even more barren and surreal.



My first experience with the Haitian people was a near fist fight between two men and their crew who were arguing over who would get to carry across the ten bags across in the rustic, wheelbarrow-like cart. There was a desperate hate on their faces and in their words as they scraped for what might be their only work and therefore their only money and therefore their only food for that day.





I was told it was **wash day**, and as we crossed the river, I saw sheets, cloths, and many colors of clothing laying out on the dirty riverbank, drying in the scorching sun as multitudes of dark-skinned bodies bathed and washed in the opaque, brown water. Everywhere you looked there was dirt— on the ground, on the houses, on the people, in the air. It was something you could not escape.



It was July 3rd, the eve of the birthday of our country (God bless America) as we made our way through the steps of **immigration** at the border town of Ouanaminthe. The town was cluttered with cement block buildings that had rebar sticking out of the tops of them with no air conditioning or electricity. It did not seem to be a problem that the immigration officials ran out of forms before the last two people in our party filled out the proper paperwork as long as the officials got the money required for each person to come into the country.

Up the riverbed, Hope for Haiti girls' house was the first building after the immigration office, and the main four-acre campus, which includes the older boys' house, church and new school, was about four or five houses down the street.

As we walked down the dirt path (which Danita called the street) with our large handcart full of baggage, we approached a high white cement fence with a large black iron gate with the words **Espoir pour Haiti (Hope for Haiti)** across the top. There were no truer words that had ever been spoken the moment we walked through the gates into a different, more beautiful world.



We were greeted by about 200 clean, uniformed children from ages 2 through 15 and all of the well dressed staff of the organization clapping with the children as the four-piece school band played the “Star Spangled Banner.”



As I said, there is green grass inside the orphanage (except for under the shade trees) as well as the fertile soil of young hearts filled with love and hope. As the children's voices filled the air with songs of praise and joy, they clapped and jumped and danced.



They grabbed me, hugged me, held my hands and would not let go. The little boys jumped on Joe and Andrew, my teenage sons, and hung on as if they had found their long-lost friends.

Pastor Mark! Pastor Mark! They cried out as they recognized him from his previous visits.

What a contrast from the barren, hateful, hopeless life outside the gates of Espoir pour Haiti. This was a haven of refuge. No one but the Americans seemed to notice the heat as we were all wearing shorts, T-shirts and tennis shoes, but they were dressed in their best.



Their world inside the gates was a taste of heaven compared to the world in the town of 60,000 that has no sewer system, city water or electricity other than privately owned generators scattered here and there.

Before Danita came, the land on which her buildings sit was a barren field of worthless dirt and cactuses that no one wanted. Now, everyone from the surrounding neighborhood comes into the gates to get as much of her well water as they want each day.

The water looks clean and fresh although Danita and the children don't drink it because the well is too shallow. But, they use it for washing, cleaning, flushing and bathing.

What a difference hope makes.

And what a difference when *hope* comes in the form of a petite, foreign woman who does not see dirt and cactuses, but green grass and shade trees.



Danita Estrella, I love you.

By Jennifer Crow

If you'd like to learn more about what Danita is doing in Haiti...

Danita's Children • Hope for Haiti Children's Center • P.O. Box 608148, Orlando, FL 32860
407.805.9532 • Email: usoffice@danitaschildren.org • www.danitaschildren.org