**Natick: 'Finding hope in Haiti,' by Peter Golden**

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Not to make too much of it, but as a Rotarian I cook community suppers and work for a variety of causes, from food pantries to scholarship fundraisers and a whole bunch of other good things like polio eradication and disaster relief. For me it’s no big deal; it’s what Rotarians do as part of our pledge to honor “Service Above Self.” So when I casually committed to a visit to Haiti with a friend I began to wonder what I had gotten myself into. A list of preventative immunizations sent me scrambling before leaving Natick, where I live, and having flown down to the country for four days and returned I’m still somewhat puzzled as to why I went. Yet my intentions were transparent enough, or so I thought: With my friend David Rhee, a fellow Rotarian from Natick, I ventured into another world, touching down in Port-au-Prince in order to visit an orphanage for which David serves as treasurer.

Disclosure: Back in the day I spent a decade teaching in some of Boston’s poorest neighborhoods and advocating for school reform. Prior to that, as a writer I covered riots and revolutions and met my share of crooks and charlatans. Cover that territory for a while and you take a skeptical view of anything that smacks of guilt or patronization.

What I encountered at the Hope for the Children of Haiti orphanage in Port Au Prince was none of that. So you can put aside any cynical notions you might have about charitable work in Lesser Developed Countries, at least in this case. All preconceptions regarding disengaged, arms-length American benevolence aside, it was a place where children whose lives had been utterly devastated by natural disaster, poverty, disease and plain hard luck had found a safe haven, love, nurturing and personal success.

The orphanage, I discovered, had gathered two cohorts of kids of roughly a hundred each. The first, assembled over two decades ago, is now living independently or in small groups and has graduated from college (in a land where almost no one goes to college) or trade school. The second, the one I encountered in the halls and classrooms of the orphanage, was assembled about five years ago and ranges in age from four or five into their late teens. In parallel, Hope for the Children runs a 300-seat school that serves local students (state schools are largely in disarray, I was told) almost all with scholarships. “Thriving” is a good way to describe most of the kids I encountered during my brief stay.

Last year I met Lee Stone, David’s colleague and executive director of Hope for the Children, which runs the orphanage and school in the Bolosse district of Port Au Prince. It is a desperately poor neighborhood in a country that by consensus is the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere. Casual conversation when Lee spoke before my Rotary club at David’s invitation led to my vague promise to lend a hand which then morphed into something more – a visit!