Amherst College  Tahina Vatel ’12
Foutbòl Bayonnais
Haiti

Project Description

“What are you up to today?” It’s a simple question that allows one to talk incessantly about what one has planned for the day. It’s a question I have become accustomed to asking first thing in the morning. This question seemed to evoke irritation and even slight anger, however, from a young man I met in Haiti. This past summer I worked as a co-director of an art camp in a small village in Bayonnais, Haiti. The camp hours were such that I had ample time to interact with the people from the village. In conversing with them, I learned that not much went on during the summertime and that people were basically idle. It was especially so for the children and young adults. School was out but swimming, camping, picnicking, building tree houses, and visiting museums and zoos weren’t options in a poor village like Bayonnais. When the art camp I co-directed was introduced, we became the main entertainment for the town. From the elderly to toddlers, they all gathered around to watch my co-worker and I teach 23 chosen students to paint, draw and write creatively. Every morning, a couple of young men met us at the school where the camp was being held to help us set up. Bonjou, good morning, I would say. Konman ou ye? Sa ’w wap fe jodi a?, how are you? What are you up to today? By the second week of me asking these habitual questions, one of the young men became annoyed. He said to me: “Tahina, over here there’s nothing to do. Isit la se leve chita wi. Over here it’s wake up and sit.” It was then that I became cognizant of the fact that my routine questions reminded them of their joblessness, their lack of education, their poverty, their misery. I never asked that question again.

Aside from the art camp, there was one other activity going on in the village - soccer games. They had a mini tournament where they played in a schoolyard with makeshift goal posts made of pipes and sticks, torn uniforms and cleats that didn’t fit. These were delicate games in that small mishaps could lead to the cancelation of the only activity that kept the people of this village going in the summertime. There was one occasion when the ball was not inflated and the only way to get air was to go to the nearest city, which was a 30-minute drive on a rocky road- that day, the game was postponed. Another time, a player, trying to score, hit the makeshift post causing it to fall and break. Finishing the game depended on if the post could be fixed - about 25 minutes later the post was fixed, the game continued. These problems somehow mirrored some of the larger problems in the country. Like these soccer games, the core of some issues in Haiti is due to lack of support and governmental structure. The people of the village had no funding to get better equipment and no formal advanced education to get jobs. Their lives, much like that of many of the poor in Haiti, consisted of makeshift materials that aren’t stable enough to withstand a kick of a ball, the strength of a thief, a strong storm, a hurricane, an earthquake.

My proposal is to create a stable summer soccer program for the youth in Bayonnais. One that would give the community an opportunity to play a game most of them have been playing practically since they could walk; an opportunity that would allow them to play without depending on the one person who owns the only ball, without having to avoid the ends of the goal posts, and without having to fit into cleats that are not their size; an opportunity that would allow them to form a league and dare to aspire to be part of larger leagues in the country. Organized soccer games could help to get at some root problems of living in an impoverished place. Entire generations of children are growing up in this village, and throughout Haiti, without
something as simple as daily soccer games. A regular, reliable soccer program could transform afternoons for people in this village and could help to address something that is stagnating. Being part of a league would teach players responsibility and the rewards that come with working with others for one common goal.

My project is to go to a village where a soccer tournament is established but is tenuous and to provide support. The immediate impact would of course be enjoyment for an entire community, because soccer games involve more than just the players. In the long run, though, I hope to address much more than that. Players of this league would learn to be responsible and accountable by signing a contract that would make attendance to games and practices mandatory. They would become a competitive team, learn organized play and take on duties within the team such as president, captain, treasurer and secretary. What goes on off the field would also be just as important. Whether it be community service such as planting trees, cleaning public areas and reading to younger children, or whether it’s having routine discussion groups that address problems in their community, the coach and I would develop a plan that would turn these players not only into better athletes but resources and hope for their neighborhood. Additionally, I plan to create an equipment rental system where teams would loan uniforms and cleats and return them at the end of each game. That way, the uniforms would belong to the league and not individual players. When I ran the idea by him, the coach who began the soccer tournament agreed that if his community were given a chance to escape its fragile state through this grant, he would manage (wash and secure) the equipment.

By providing a foundation and stability with these games, summertime for children, young adults and even grown-ups could be spent active. This can help give shape and structure to their days. They would have something to look forward to and to depend on. This, in turn, would lead to less loitering, idleness, anger and instead to peace of mind, which is for many, the most important kind of peace there is.

The headmaster of the school is awfully excited about possibilities. A successful completion of this project could lead to the addition of soccer as an official after school activity— for both boys and girls. Soccer could then be used to promote education and perhaps in the long run promote the arts since sports and arts are rarely incorporated into Haitian school curriculum. This project would mean a chance for the youth in Bayonnais to walk proudly onto the field in uniforms that symbolize, among several other things, unity. Establishing a stable summer tournament would mean, even for the time being, setting aside their many problems and giving them the satisfaction of turning disparate elements into an official Bayonnais team.