Section I

Project Goal: To develop Bayonnais through football (known in the U.S. as soccer); Begin by establishing a small league and infrastructure, then connect players to community development efforts.

When I arrived in Bayonnais I met with the two leaders with whom I’d been corresponding in the spring. From that meeting I realized that football in Bayonnais had no real local team, no real coach and no real structure. The first step was to fix that, get a ‘constitution’ going and start getting together a committee to address infrastructure needs and future development efforts. Early on, I met with the players to get their opinion on how to structure the team. Because there was no real coach, I instructed the captain on some drills and tips on how to use the equipment I brought. Practice was a bit awkward with the new material but the players eventually got the hang of it. After the first practice, I met with the players and talked to them about how they wanted the team to move forward, what was missing, and how they could help fix it. I got the feeling they were rarely asked their opinions, not just on football but on so many things; this gave them a voice and some control. During that meeting, a leader in the community came by and thanked me for “living among the people I’ve chosen to help,” because, he said, most other volunteers stay in the city and travel back and forth to the village daily. “You are sleeping, eating and spending all of your time with us,” he said, “that, although it may seem small to you, is a great deal to us.” I nearly cried.

The players didn’t exactly express themselves to me every chance they got. It was sometimes hard to determine whether something was working or not. So every once in a while, I’d have private conversations with one of them at a time and subtly dig for information: What are they talking about when I’m not around? Do they like the project? Do they think it’s working? How do they think it can improve? In one conversation with a young man, he told me something I wasn’t expecting to hear. He said my way of interacting with them “ba nou valè, gives them value.” He went on to list examples of some of the small actions I had done, actions I never even thought twice about. The most powerful thing he said to me was to ask that I keep supporting the neighborhood. He relayed to me how thankful they were that I came. He said some people on the team never thought they’d wear a uniform in their lifetime. These were football players he was talking about, I thought, how could they never expect to wear or own a uniform? That comment definitely touched me and showed me the value of this work.

Another highlight was that my parents were really proud of me. They’d heard stories from Haitian family who had come to visit me in the village and were so excited about the success of the program. Hearing their excitement and hearing snippets of what my family had told them made me understand my impact on the village. My parents’ enthusiasm helped me celebrate, put the stresses aside and realize the influence I was having on people’s lives.

One key asset was our sense organization from the outset: We sent invitation letters, we had a general meeting explaining the rules, and we handed out protocols and the official tournament calendar.

Some of what I learned from this experience was due to missteps or struggles. I went to Haiti with a set plan on how I would go about developing the area by way of football. Upon my arrival, I immediately realized that my plan had to be adjusted. With the help of people in the community, it was revised as follows: There would be a tournament that would include teams from different areas within Bayonnais. The tournament’s objective would be to select best players to form a single team to represent all of Bayonnais and work towards developing the area. We limited the tournament to local teams to create a
more manageable scope. Because of this, every player in the tournament knew one another which increased camaraderie at the matches. In the end, there were 6 teams of 12 players each - a very manageable number for a small project. Keeping the tournament local also maximized safety because, although several tournaments were played in the area throughout the summer, because this particular one had cups, medals and other prizes, the stakes were high and the chance of bad behavior was heightened.

We recruited players from the 6 participating teams to form a 24-member football club for Bayonnais. Our next goal was to give club members tools to help develop the area. Ideally they would learn how to effectively contact local government, they would be required to complete a set number of community service hours, they would promote things like safe sex, energy efficient cooking appliances among others. They would also, of course, play locally and nationally to represent Bayonnais, raise money and help raise awareness of their mission.

The most unfortunate development was when players and fans became too caught up in the competition - winning the trophies, metals and championship title - and lost sight of the bigger mission which was to develop the area. One team, angry about their disqualification, prevented the tournament from finishing properly. We thus cut short our plans to expand the club for safety reasons.

It was extremely hard to follow a funding system based on receipts in a country where that system barely exists. Amherst College’s way of distributing the funds was to give an advance, then collect receipts to reconcile said advance before dispersing further funds. This was fairly easy while I was prepping and purchasing items in the United States, but it became difficult when I got to Haiti. At first I tried to stay on top of things by, for instance, recording the amount of money I spent on food each day but then controlling the project and keeping track of a series of small expenses became overwhelming. I began to lose track and told myself that I’d put my efforts into completing the project first then deal with financial record later. In the end, managing the record-keeping was overly burdensome. In the end, even as I departed Bayonnais earlier than I hoped, those involved in the project thanked me for my efforts and my belief in them.

Section II

I wrote in my proposal that the most important type of peace is peace of mind. I still firmly believe that. Worrying about where your next meal is coming from or whether or not you can afford to attend school this year, or whether you’ll get evicted creates an unsettled spirit. These pressures can inspire a survival mentality where people can go to extremes: (1) do just about anything to survive, or (2) simply give up on life. Certainly, the reaction to poverty is very complicated, but the need for security, which counters the unsettled spirit, is fundamental. My aim with this project was not to solve all financial concerns but it was to give the community, especially the players, something to look forward to in the short term and to have a hand in bettering their situations in the long term.

I don’t know that my perspective of the world has changed but this experience has definitely changed my perception of Haiti. I learned so much about the inner workings of the country, how the country operates, what it takes to be successful, the people’s mindset, in a word - the culture. I am much more prepared now than I was before to start a program or a business in Haiti. (Tahina Vatel)