

Gala for Hope paves road to success in Haiti

The children who attend the Good Samaritans School in Haiti are ready for more. Elementary schools there go up to sixth grade; beyond that is high school.

Good schools are in scarce supply in the impoverished nation, but the Baltimore-Haiti Outreach Project sponsored by the Archdiocese of Baltimore's Mission Office has made an impact by building schools, missions and chapels, mostly through its "sister diocese" partnership with the Diocese of Gonaïves, Haiti.

The almost 300 people who gathered Oct. 24 for "Gala of Hope - the Spirit of Haiti" at the Marriott Hunt Valley Inn heard Deacon Rodrigue Mortel, M.D., director of the archdiocesan mission office, talk about the successes of the schools that have already been built and the need for more.

Dr. Mortel noted that most of the children in the schools supported through the project, though intellectually capable, have no access to quality secondary education for a variety of reasons.

"Our goal has always been to establish a pilot program that, if successful, could be transported from one place to another," he said. At places such as Good Samaritan School and Cardinal Keeler Center, "we are now feeding 14,000 teachers and students every school day."

In fact, some Haitian parents send their children to school not primarily to learn but to eat, so enrollment in all the schools has increased substantially.

In building the Good Samaritan and Cardinal Keeler schools, the project used only local materials and local labor. Good Samaritan is the largest employer in the St. Marc area of Haiti, Dr. Mortel said.

At this point, the construction and employment have contributed a little more than \$4 million to the local economy of the country.

“By the time we build the college (high school) which is the purpose this evening, we will have injected \$6 million into the economy,” he said. “But more important, we have touched hearts.”

He noted that the adult volunteers who have accompanied mission trips to Haiti have been changed by the experience. One has entered the seminary, two have entered the Peace Corps and all the adults who have been there say they have received more than they have given.

According to the Mortel Family Foundation, approximately 20 percent of children who reach 5 years of age in Haiti attend school. In many rural areas, schools are totally nonexistent. Although public schools, where available, are tuition-free, parents must provide books and other school materials, so most poor families cannot afford these.

The schools provided by the Baltimore-Haiti Project have made a difference for those who attend. Dr. Mortel read a letter from the sixth-grade class of Good Samaritan School in which those who are ready to complete their schooling say they are ready to be employed. “Thanks to you, we are what we are today,” they told their advocate and benefactor. “We and our parents cannot find words to express our gratitude.”

Dr. Mortel noted that adults who have experienced a three-year literacy school provided by the project don’t want to leave either.

When he went to Haiti to help with the graduation for the literacy school’s class they said they didn’t want to graduate; they want to go on and continue to learn.

“We cannot stop here. We have to build a high school of good quality for these kids who are intellectually capable to go on,” he said.

He noted that a grant of \$1 million from the James M. and Margaret V. Stine Foundation has been received that gets the project more than halfway off the ground. With the help of that grant, the archdiocesan mission office, the Mortel Family Charitable Foundation and benefactors such as those at the gala, the new school can become a reality.

Emcee Mark Steiner of WEAA radio and auctioneer Jonathan Melnick of

Melnick/Newell Auctioneers led a live auction of vacations, Haitian art and special dinner experiences. A silent auction and other raffles also benefited the fund.