

# Hoops for Haiti

*The following was originally published in "Blakefield," a publication of Loyola Blakefield in Towson. It is republished with permission.*

In the spring of 2002, Dr. Jim Taneyhill '65, DDS, sat in the pew at St. John the Evangelist Church in Hydes, MD, and listened to a guest speaker talk about volunteer work being done in a Haitian orphanage and school run by the Xaverian Brothers. Inspired by what he heard and influenced by his men-for-others roots from Loyola Blakefield, Jim made a week-long trip to Haiti to volunteer his dental services there.

The following spring, he again traveled to Haiti and spent most of his time doing tooth extractions for children. "When stripping sugar cane, Haitians use their front teeth, rotting them," said Taneyhill. "The adults and children were very courteous and grateful for my help." Jim found this experience to be physically and emotionally rewarding, and out of these journeys came a desire to establish a more permanent relationship.

In July of 2003, Taneyhill spoke to members of his church about the desperation that he witnessed and the fact that the Haitian government offered its citizens nothing in the way of social services. He invited parishioners to become involved with the Baltimore Haiti Outreach Program, which was formed by the Archdiocese of Baltimore in 1997, under the leadership of Cardinal William Keeler. The relationship with the Diocese of Gonaives in Haiti was built with the goals to assist the parishioners, to equip them with skills to change the future of the country, and to offer opportunities to members of the Archdiocese of Baltimore to grow in faith through service and mission to those less fortunate.

With the beginning of the Archdiocesan Haiti Outreach Program, there came an opportunity for local parishes to enter a relationship with a sister parish and to offer spiritual and material help. According to the Archdiocese of Baltimore, the need was great as eighty percent of the population in Haiti lives below the poverty level, more than two-thirds of the labor force has no formal job, only forty-five percent of the total population has achieved literacy, and eighty percent of the residents are

Roman Catholic.

In December 2003, Deacon Rodrigué Mortel, director of the outreach program at the time, spoke at Taneyhill's church. He announced the partnership between St. John's and St. Guillaume Parish in La Chapelle, Haiti. Their first outreach projects, which Jim helped organize, were to fund the construction of a roof on one of the missions and establish a school lunch program that provided one daily predictable meal for children.

Fast forward to 2016. Taneyhill was attending an adult formation program here at Loyola with Director of Ignatian Mission & Identity at the time, Ben Horgan. He approached Horgan with the idea to have students from Loyola visit Saint-Michel-de-l'Atalaye, the second largest city in Haiti, where he had just helped install a brand-new basketball court for one of the schools there. Taneyhill, who played basketball all four years at Loyola, thought it would be a great way for members of our varsity basketball team to use their skills to help others. "Jim and his church were instrumental in building the court at San Peadro School in San Michel," said JV Basketball Coach Steve Breit. "It was Jim's early vision with building that court to hold some kind of clinic there for the children of that community."

The idea was to make it a part of the students' Christian Service experience, so last summer, Davalli and Breit visited the community to see if it would be the right fit for our Dons. "We came back and met with President Day, Principal Marinacci, and Ben Horgan to give our perspective on all of it, and they approved."

On June 28, five rising seniors on the varsity basketball team—Conner Hepting, Brendan Fox, Owen Reynolds, Emmet Reynolds, and Aidan Thomas—departed for the inaugural service trip with Davalli and Breit. After missing their connecting flight in Atlanta, the group finally arrived in the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince on Friday morning and drove five hours through jungles and mountains on winding unpaved roads to San Michel.

"During the drive, it was a bit of a culture shock as we got to see the harsh conditions in which the average Haitian lives," said Emmet Reynolds. "Once we got to San Michel, we were a little more isolated, but it was good to be able to see the whole country. It really put things into perspective."

Over the course of the next four days, our Dons organized a basketball camp for members of the San Michel community ranging in age from 5 to 22. Each day started with Mass in the morning at 6 a.m. and a clinic for girls from 8-11 a.m.

After that, our students served lunch to the children and had the opportunity to walk through the town and markets to see how they lived on a daily basis. Then, they rested for a few hours and ran a camp for boys from 4-7 p.m. In the evenings, Coach Breit would lead a reflection on the day.

“There was no formal sign-up, so each day more and more members of the community would just show up through word of mouth,” said Breit. “Space was very limited as we only had two hoops and a concrete slab that was off to the side. The students set up stations for shooting, ball handling, and more advanced drills, and on the final day, we had more than 80 guys show up.”

Another challenge for the group was communication.

“It was tough the first day because although we had a translator, he was really just trying to keep everyone organized,” said Hepting. “We had to figure out how to communicate basketball terms with them like ‘dribble’ and ‘shoot.’ It was a little frustrating at first, but by the second day, we got the hang of it.”

The hardest part of the trip was leaving.

“After just four days, our guys couldn’t believe how attached and invested they got in those kids, because they see their situation and they empathize with them,” said Breit. “They had to deal with the heat and humidity, the language barrier, and being out of their comfort zone the entire time, but in the end, they were able to connect with these children by sharing something that they love to do. I think that’s what made it such a powerful and unforgettable experience.”