

Prayers, then applause from mission to Haiti during return to Baltimore

Four anxious days later than anticipated, eight youth volunteers and five adult chaperones are back home from a mission trip to Haiti that they won't soon forget.

The 13 were supposed to return July 7 from a weeklong mission to St. Marc, the base of the Archdiocese of Baltimore's extensive support of the Diocese of Gonaïves, but unrest in the Caribbean nation twice delayed their departure until July 11.

For many, the return home included four airports.

The group finally left Toussaint Louverture International Airport in Port-au-Prince the afternoon of July 11, and landed shortly after 6 p.m. at John F. Kennedy International Airport in Queens, N.Y. Their connection to Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport touched down after 11 p.m.

For some, it was on to a rendezvous point at Baltimore-Washington Thurgood Marshall International Airport. After being picked up there by her grandmother, Micah Buser finally got to her home in Ridgeley, W. Va., at 3:30 a.m. July 12.

A parishioner of Our Lady of the Mountains in Cumberland, Buser had a good excuse for missing her cantor duties at St. Ambrose in Cresaptown the morning of July 8.

The group's originally scheduled flight home the previous day was canceled by unrest that followed sometimes-violent protests against a steep hike in fuel prices imposed by the government of Haiti, the most impoverished nation in the Western Hemisphere.

Order was restored after the government canceled the price increase, but not before the travel plans of many missions to the nation were altered.

On July 9, the Baltimore group's two-hour drive from St. Marc to Port-au-Prince

encountered disturbances along the way, and the mission returned to Les Bons Samaritans Primary School, where the volunteers had already spent a week of activities with the schoolchildren.

“The first delay didn’t bother me,” said Buser, 18, who is entering West Virginia University. “I missed my family, but I was already missing the kids. After the second delay, some of us were asking, ‘God, why do you want us here longer?’ I know that he wanted us to soak up as much of Haiti as we could.”

The volunteers ranged in age from 19-year-old Molly Thate, a parishioner of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton in Crofton and rising sophomore at York (Pa.) College, to Julia Snyder, 16, a parishioner of St. Patrick in Havre de Grace and rising sophomore at The Catholic High School of Baltimore.

Christine Parkent, a parishioner of Our Lady of the Chesapeake in Lake Shore, is a rising sophomore at Harvard.

The mission included a brother and sister, Ty and Lynn Schumacher, of St. John the Evangelist Parish (Long Green Valley) in Hydes, a rising senior at The John Carroll School in Bel Air and rising sophomore at Mount St. Mary’s University in Emmitsburg, respectively.

The mission included two recent graduates of Maryvale Preparatory School in Lutherville, Olivia du Bois and Brooke Nixon, a parishioner of Sacred Heart in Glyndon. They are entering the University of Richmond and Christopher Newport University, both in Virginia, respectively.

Maryvale also supplied one of the four adult chaperones, theology teacher Ann Cory. The other chaperones included Sam Brimmer, a graduate of Archbishop Spalding High School in Severn, and Steve Anderson, a human resources manager with the archdiocese. Raeghan Smith, a graduate of Mount de Sales Academy and student at St. Joseph’s University in Philadelphia, attended as an “alumni peer.”

The mission was led by Rachel Bowles, a program assistant with the archdiocesan Missions Office. She told the Review that the July 9 attempt to reach Port-au-Prince was aborted when friends of Deacon Rodrigue Mortel, director emeritus of the

Baltimore Haiti Project, perceived roadblocks as a potential threat.

“There was a car in front of us, to see if there was any reason to turn around before a van full of kids encountered danger,” Bowles said. “We prayed the rosary, the whole bus. When we completed the rosary, there was silence. People were silently praying.”

“We were always safe. We were not threatened or in danger in any way. We weren’t in the midst of the scenes shown on TV.”

With the earliest rescheduled departure two days later, some spent July 10 at a beach south of St. Marc. Finally, on July 11, the mission’s members safely made their way to the airport in Port-au-Prince.

“It was surreal. No one thought we were going to leave until we saw the plane land,” Barron said, of the American Airlines jet that took them back to the U.S. “Once were on the (jet) plane and it left the ground, everyone applauded.”

Barron estimated that it was her 20th mission to Haiti, but only her second as a mother. Her son, Joseph, turns 1 year old Aug. 1.

The situation in Haiti led to the cancellation of a July 8-14 mission to St. Marc by a group from Archbishop Spalding High School in Severn. Its students and chaperones instead spent the week serving at several programs and outreaches in the archdiocese. They began each day with 6:45 a.m. Mass celebrated by Father Josh Laws at the home of Pat Brady, the mission leader. Chaperones included Rob Medoff, an English teacher at Spalding, who was **moved to write about the spirit of its students.**

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