

Up the coast from Port-au-Prince, hope comes into view

ST. MARC, Haiti - Deacon Rodrigue Mortel and Jeff Remington, a 7th-grade science teacher in Palmyra, Pa., walked into an educational tech store outside Port-au-Prince, a humble but air-conditioned space.

The salesman's motorcycle was parked in the showroom. A second glance at the uniformed young woman sitting in the shade of the building's entry, a rifle resting on her lap, was another reminder of a world turned upside down.

Nearly three months after the Jan. 12 earthquake and its aftermath killed 230,000 in Haiti, images on screen and the printed word do little to prepare the first-time visitor for the apocalyptic landscape in what Deacon Mortel describes as "the developing world."

In the span of three hours running an errand in and around the capital city, that rifle was the only sign of authority or security we witnessed once leaving Toussaint L'Ouverture Airport April 7.

The tarps protecting tent cities are adorned with the brands of USAid or Buddhism International or Doctors Without Borders, but amid the chickens, goats and pigs roaming fetid streets, noticeable by their absence are Caterpillars, the heavy equipment needed to remove concrete and rubble, the demolition work that needs to precede rebuilding.

"There're still bodies underneath that one," Deacon Mortel nodded toward a multi-story building that was now an inert accordion.

Across the road from the tech store in Petionville were the omnipresent tents and tarps. A weekend camping is fun, but these are homes, with no electricity, no potable water and no privacy. The latter issue seemed moot when a disoriented woman walked down the middle of the street at 1 p.m., naked.

The Route de Delmas is lined with street vendors, as most commercial activity remains outside, the fear of aftershocks keeping many of the homeless from returning to shelter that may not be so permanent after all.

Deacon Mortel and Remington, one of his regular volunteers, were shopping for Classmate PCs for The Good Samaritans School, one of the deacon's legacies in and around his hometown of St. Marc, a 45-mile drive up the coast from Port-au-Prince.

Here, any friend of Deacon Mortel's is an honored guest, and I am greeted like one of the family. Schoolgirls knock on his door and bestow the French custom of greeting with a kiss.

As pupils gathered at 7:30 a.m. April 8, one feels like a rock star or Olympic champion, as uniformed boys and girls run to give hugs and high-fives. The school day begins with children singing the Haitian national anthem and the Magnificat in French, then, in English, "If You're Happy and You Know It." They've been fed breakfast and begun their studies in 45-seat classrooms that evoke 1960 in East Baltimore, under the direction of Sisters of St. Joseph de Cluny, with funding that originates from Deacon Mortel.

I am writing from the computer room that is dedicated to the "Honor of the Holy Family." It's 10:15 a.m., and recess is in full swing. As desperate as Haiti appeared less than 24 hours ago, I have never heard a more joyful cacophony than the one we're now being serenaded by.

This school opened a decade ago, with 65 students. It now educates 600, and the

need is compounding, as an estimated 175,000 displaced Haitians have moved to St. Marc and other towns in the state of Artibonite. Its boundaries are used by the Diocese of Gonaives, where Deacon Mortel, the director of the Baltimore Haiti Project, among other ventures, has inspired so many in the Archdiocese of Baltimore to give so much.

Visitors, however, get much more in return.