

Little Man with a Big Heart

Jean Widletson Gaspard

Written by Maria Blon



The original reason for interviewing eight year old Jean Widletson Gaspard was for a children's book comparing the day in the life of a child in Merger, Haiti, at the HEART School, with a child at the Truman Moon School in Middletown, New York. I never expected to receive so much wisdom and compassion from a young boy.

I was able to put together the following story about Gaspard using interviews with his teacher Magdala Jean Baptist, HEART School Director of Operations Shad St Louis, Community Liaison Carina Blon, and School Director Dieumaitre Derosie. It was made possible with translation help from Shad and Carina.

Home and Family

While his given name is Jean Widletson Gaspard, he goes by Gaspard, pronounced “Gaspa,” with the “r” and “d” silent. Gaspard lives in a rented cinder block house filled with only necessities, bordered by gardens of sugar cane, plantains, and mango trees. He lives with his mother and two brothers, who are both younger than him. He sleeps in a bed with one brother, while the baby is in his mom’s bed. They have an outhouse and a well on the property—simple luxuries in a third world country. Gaspard’s father never comes to the house. Sometimes, the family sees him in the street working. When asked about his father, Gaspard says, “My father has a motorcycle and can build big houses.”

Gaspard has a little garden. He noticed that, when he waters his garden, the plants grow. When he doesn’t water, the plants don’t do well. Gaspard told us, “I had to teach my brother not to take the tops off the plants. I got mad when he did that and stopped watering. Now I am watering again, and the plants are growing.”

School

Gaspard walks more than a mile to school, where he attends second grade—which he is repeating due to difficulty with reading. My husband Tom, my friend Anthony, Gaspard’s classmate Danielo and I walked with Gaspard to school on Monday, January 6, 2014. He was eagerly waiting for us at 6:30 am. Anthony took pictures, then Gaspard took Anthony’s very heavy camera bag and carried it to school, in addition to his already-heavy book bag. Gaspard had a bounce in his step the whole thirty-six-minute, more than a mile, walk to school.

Gaspard’s favorite subjects are math, writing, English, and drawing. He is very talkative and loves to play soccer and other games with his friends at recess. He says he would always like to go to school and will work hard. Gaspard is very kind. He enjoys walking the preschoolers to lunch, holding their hands and gently leading them to the cafeteria.

Gaspard’s biggest challenge in school is reading. His mother is not involved in his learning. Gaspard studies by himself, but needs someone to give him more attention and help. School Director Dieumaitre

discussed getting a reading circle organized to help Gaspard and other students at the school who need tutoring. Shad and third grade teacher Magdala Jean Baptiste have organized the third grade students to tutor the younger children after school. This additional learning time for motivated children without home support will be invaluable.

Gaspard's Mother

Gaspard helps his mom by getting water when she washes clothes, because she can't carry the water buckets. He also goes shopping for her since she can't walk well. In fact, at the time of our visit (on January 6, 2014), Gaspard's mother had an infection in her leg which had been hurting for almost two weeks, and a large boil had erupted behind her knee which was oozing with blood and fluid. She had a cloth to catch what came out and said that she could not afford to go to the doctor.

Through Carina, we found out that the clinic was open the next day, and she could see the doctor for the equivalent of six dollars, American. Anthony gave her more than enough to cover her visit to the clinic. When we saw Gaspard a few days later, we asked how his mother was doing. He explained that she could not walk to the doctor, so did not go for help, and her leg was still very painful. I felt frustrated that getting medical attention for his mom was so challenging. I worried about her, hoping that she would get better soon. By the end of January, her leg was better and she was able to attend a conference with Gaspard's teacher Magdala. It was one more example of how a medical problem which is simple to fix here in the States is much more challenging in Haiti. Gaspard told us that he would like to be a doctor so that he can help his mom and other people when they are sick. He also likes learning about how plants can help people heal. Gaspard has never been very sick himself. He told us that, a few times, he just threw up, but that was all.

When we asked him about his life, Gaspard told us his favorite food is rice with bean sauce or vegetable sauce. Through our interpreters, we asked him a few more questions, which are asked and answered, below:

What is the best part of your life, Gaspard?

- I love my mom.
- I love life.
- I love school, because they make an effort for me.
- I like when I have work to do, like carrying water for my mom to use. When I have constructive things to do, I feel lighter.
- I like to help other kids with their homework.

What is the worst part of your life?

- I don't like when kids fight.
- I don't like when my mother or brothers are suffering. I feel scared for them.

After we asked our questions, Carina asked if Gaspard had any questions for us. Gaspard asked if we live well in the States, then asked what our parent's names are and where they live. Then he started talking more, saying, "Here, people don't put their heads together and work as a team. When I get older, I want to put my head together with people and work as a team to make this country better. If people put their heads together, this country would be rich."

We thought we were finished, but Gaspard said, "You didn't ask me what kinds of trees I like." And then he began to tell us that he likes trees with fruit that make people better. He asked me what kinds of trees I like, and I said that I like mango trees. Gaspard asked what kind, because there are many different kinds of mangoes.

Gaspard also explained that there are many trees that you just "put a leaf on you and you heal." His mom said that papaya trees are healing trees. Gaspard learned in school that there are trees in the States that do not grow in Haiti, and trees in Haiti that do not grow in the States. He asked if we could send him seeds to grow one of our trees in Haiti, but I explained that in New York it is very cold with snow and ice. The trees from there would not grow in Haiti. Gaspard said that he would put a big chunk of ice next to the tree, and another

one on top of the tree, each morning before school so the tree would be cold. When the tree was big, he would send it to us to grow but he was not sure there would be a tree big enough.

Gaspard told us that he had heard about trains. He would like to see trains and wants to see people “put their heads together.” Gaspard doesn’t like when aid workers in Haiti give out food and fighting breaks out. If he was giving out food, he would share and bring things to people’s houses. I asked if he would like a picture of trees in New York. He said if we could send one, he would like a picture—or we could get part of a tree and send it to him. He and his mom were all smiles as we said goodbye. We were almost to Shad’s house—about a ten-minute walk away—and Gaspard came running to us and said, “A word I have to say; I love you all with all my heart.”

The next day, with Carina’s help translating, we asked Rosita, the neighborhood herbal expert, if she would teach Gaspard what plants to use to help in the healing of his mom’s leg. So Rosita asked Gaspard to arrive at school early and she would teach him when she made tea in the morning, which he did.

I hope that Gaspard continues to learn from Rosita. I love helping people to connect and learn from each other.

Gaspard’s Lesson: Hope through Wisdom and Action

Gaspard is such a gentle, kind, and thoughtful young boy wise beyond his years, despite living in great poverty. My hope is that he will be able to keep going to school, and to study in the medical field while learning about plant remedies, which can be helpful to his people. I imagine Gaspard inspiring people in Haiti to “put their heads together” and work as a team to make their country better. I know that he will be leading people with his heart.

Here is a quote from a world leader who shares Gaspard’s philosophy of hope and doing good:

The best way to not feel hopeless is to get up and do something. Don’t wait for good things to happen to you. If you go out and make some good things happen, you will fill the world with hope, you will fill yourself with hope. ~ Barack Obama

Reflection

Children often have wisdom beyond their years that could inspire adults to see situations from a fresh and hopeful perspective. Have you ever tried listening to a child's ideas about how to make the world better? Resist the urge to correct their thinking. Listen fully, engage in their stories, and allow them to take you away to a place of innocence that you may not have visited for some time.

Give yourself a vacation by listening to a child and playing with a child. Immerse yourself in his or her world and see what happens. Then, as an adult, consider what action you could take to help make dreams of a world filled with hope a reality.