



Three sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary have given new hope to Haitian refugees in Virginia. Now the sisters need help. They are the focus of Extension's Thanksgiving Appeal.

Rescuing the Boat People

by Brad Collins

L'Herrison Seide is a typical member of the small community of refugees who are trying to start a new life in Roanoke, Virginia.

A fisherman from a small coastal village in Haiti, L'Herrison decided two years ago he could no longer watch his wife and two children suffer in that poorest country in the Western Hemisphere.

One night, he and 18 others crouched into a 10-foot boat without food and water and set sail for Florida. As their boat was tossed about by the Caribbean waves for 22 days, the refugees pondered what they might find once they landed — if they landed. All they had was trust in God and hope for

A stranger in a strange land, a refugee mother calms her two children.

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a better future.

L'Harrison is one of nearly 80,000 boat people who fled in dismay from Haiti. Though only 700 miles from Miami, that tiny country, the size of Maryland, is one of the neediest in the world.

Most of the six million Haitians earn less in a year than the average American brings home in a week. The people have the second lowest caloric intake in the world and one of the world's highest infant mortality rates.

Haitian refugees have been coming to the U.S. since the 1920s. But it was not until they joined the surge of Cuban refugees in 1980 that they came to public attention.

"It is incredible what these people had to go through to survive," said Sister Adele Della Valle,

SNJM, who has spent the last two years with boat people who made their way to southwest Virginia. "Their Faith is such that they truly believe God reached out and parted the waters so they could come here."

The exodus, however, is only the beginning of the Haitians' troubles. They must overcome the stress of culture shock, "survivor's guilt," and difficulties in adjusting to a strange, new world. They suffer from depression and homesickness as most leave families behind. But having faced extreme poverty in Haiti, they remain highly motivated to succeed here.

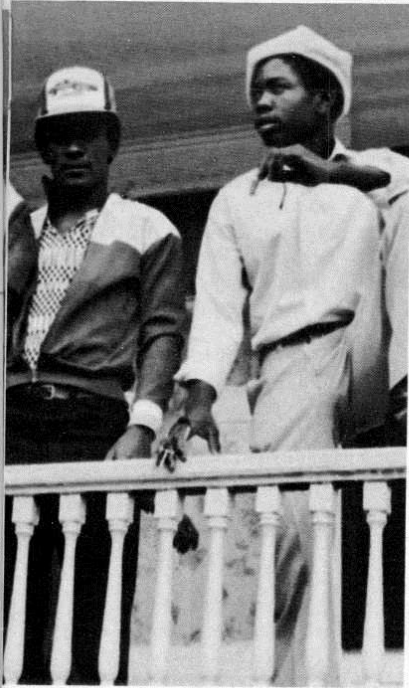
"Sometimes I'm not sure whether they are better off being here," Sister Adele reflected. "But they made the choice. Our job is to

help them while they are here with us. To refuse them help at this point would be like leaving them to drown on a sinking ship."

Sister Adele is one of three Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary who have taken the Haitians under their care with the promise of Extension funding. Sisters Adele and Rose Gallagher help with resettlement, job searches and advocacy on behalf of the Creole-speaking refugees. Sister Jeanne Morin, who tutored Asian refugees in St. Paul, Minn., came south to teach the Haitians English.

Sister Rose was first to arrive in rural Virginia, originally to minister to migrant workers who were picking apples on large farms outside of Roanoke.

At left, L'Harrison Seide misses his family he left in Haiti. Below, a more fortunate family who stayed together.



The orchards, sometimes on dirt roads miles from any town, are hosts to several hundred men, women and children caught up in the "migrant stream."

For the Haitians, the migrant stream begins in Florida where workers harvest sugar cane and grapefruit for three months of the year. After that, they must head north to pick peaches in Georgia, watermelons in the Carolinas and apples in Virginia. The migrants live in overcrowded farm houses, working from dawn to dusk. Their earnings may amount to 30 cents for each bushel of apples picked — perhaps \$75 a week.

Eager to work and send money to families they left behind, the Haitians accept the low-paying work because they can find no



A Haitian refugee and his daughter enjoy a moment together. Displaying a deep faith in God, many of the refugees live with courage and hope for a better future in this country.

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better jobs. It was here that Sister Rose noticed that the Haitians were the most isolated and neglected of all migrant workers.

Most cannot speak English. Because of the poor educational system in Haiti, many are illiterate even in their own language of Creole, a derivation of French. Some cannot sign their names.

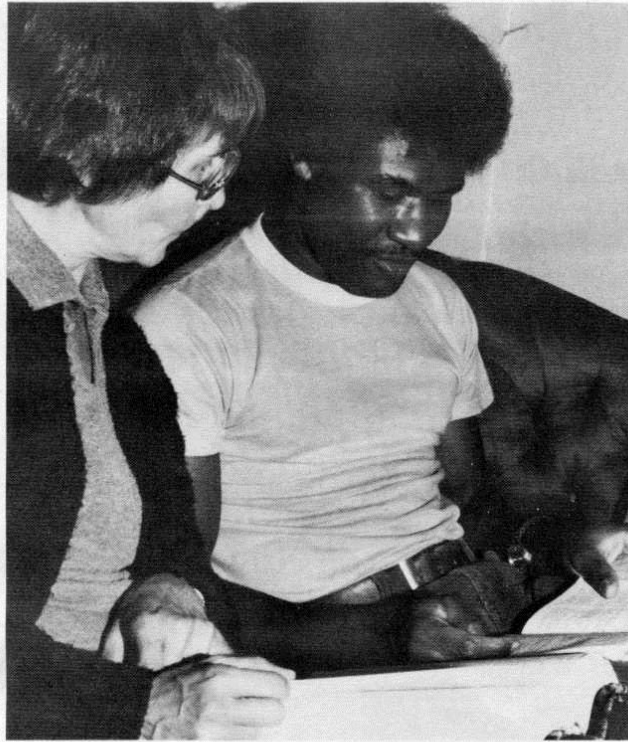
In addition to their language deficiencies, they also suffer from culture clash. Theirs is a culture of voodoo and primitive living conditions. And they have been labelled as high-risk to the mysterious AIDS disease.

"I never saw such eager students. They would bring their babies and wives, if they had any, and make it a real family experience," Sister Jeanne said. "It was amazing that after picking apples all day, they would arrive so eager to learn."

Sister Rose remembered vividly how their ministry began in October, 1981, just one day before the Haitians were to crowd into old buses and leave for Florida's citrus fields. One migrant pleaded with Sister Adele to stay and help him find steady work to support his wife and nine children who were back in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Altogether, eight men asked the sisters to help them get out of the migrant stream.

"We were the people who had found someone to care for the babies and the abscessed teeth. We had brought the lawyer who spoke Creole, the blankets, the medicine, and night English classes to these Haitians who crowded into a cold room and sat on the floor, going without supper after working all day, in order to come to our 'school.'"

"So another journey began for them with new hopes and questions and fears. Seven of the eight had wives and children still in Haiti. But their children might go



At top, Sister Adele helps one of the refugees pray from a Creole Bible. The sisters have learned the native Haitian language through prayer with the refugees. Above, (left to right) Sisters Adele, Rose and Jeanne share stories of their day with the refugees.

to school, might have enough to eat, if they could only send some money back," Sister Rose said.

The sisters took the men to Roanoke which offered some chance of entry-level jobs in restaurants and small businesses. One became so homesick he returned to Haiti. But seven found work — full or part-time — with restaurants and cleaning firms, washing dishes and floors.

They found minimum wage jobs, usually with no health insurance, sick days or vacation time. But they survive by sharing rents of two small apartments. And they are happy because of their deep faith in God.

"In Haiti, everyone has something — the land, chickens, the ocean — but nobody has very much. We share what we have," L'Herrison explained.

"The challenges they face are formidable, yet they are happy, intelligent, self-reliant and gentle people," Sister Adele said. "None receive any financial assistance except from each other. They scrimp and save their small wages to send anything they can back to their families."

Though they remain poor, their generosity one day surprised Sister Rose. "We did not even have money for gasoline," Sister Rose said. "And one of the Haitians took \$10 from his pay check and gave it to me. 'Here, Sister, you helped me get a job. You take this.'"

Word of the sisters' work has also spread to the overcrowded community of refugees in Florida. So far, 27 more Haitians have followed. And that number is growing each day.

Their morale is shaped by the sisters' ministry, however. In addition to teaching English and finding jobs, the sisters share in the Haitians' joys and sorrows. The sisters have learned Creole in order to help the refugees celebrate their faith in their own native language.



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For a refugee in deep depression because his mother had died in Haiti, Sister Rose proposed a solution. "He had been down for several weeks so I went to his apartment and said, 'Let's pray.' And as I sat down at the table, he knelt down beside me and just prayed out loud for the longest time. Then we prayed together. And it was a moving experience to have him share his grief with me."

Grieving and sense of loss is what the Haitians are going through. Their present status as refugees does not allow these young men to bring their families to this country nor can they return to Haiti for even a short visit. So they face years of heart-breaking separation, their only communication is an occasional letter from the loved ones they left behind.

Frequently, brothers and sisters who have been separated may come as close as the next farm or town away and never make contact with each other.

"It's being called the Haitian Diaspora," Sister Adele said. "It's sad to see families broken up like this as these people struggle to eke out a living, sacrificing so much of their lives just to get by. But they don't see any alternatives, and these jobs are better than none."

Christmas especially is a time of great joy and celebration for the Haitians because of their deep faith. But in Roanoke, Christmas is a reminder of the separation from their families. Many become so depressed that they sleep the day through to avoid the pain.

The sisters have introduced the Haitians to local parishes. But it is difficult for the Haitians to feel at home with services in English. They need worship in their native

language.

"It means so much more to them to worship in Creole," Sister Adele said. "Their word for God, for instance, is 'Papa,' which reflects the intimate relationship they have with Him. The English language just does not carry the same meaning for them."

To help the Haitians and to find quarters for themselves, the sisters have appealed to Extension to help them establish "Hope House." The center would serve as home for the sisters and a place where refugees of all nationalities could turn for help. Its formation is the goal of Extension's Thanksgiving appeal.

"Support for our services among the migrant workers and refugees has come almost entirely from begging and small gifts," Sister Rose said. The sisters have moved from home to home as local Catholic families went on vacation or



At left, Haitians pack to leave one of the apple farms outside of Roanoke. Below, Sister Jeanne helps one of the refugees with an English lesson.

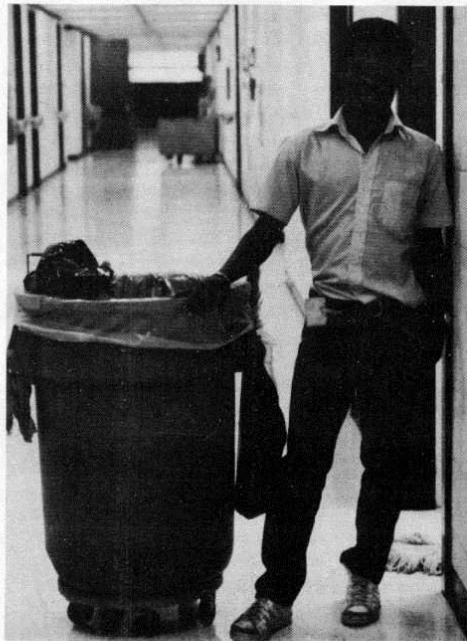


made room for them. But the constant upheaval has wearied the sisters and made it difficult to stay in touch with the refugees.

The sisters picture Hope House as a common place for the refugees to meet to celebrate and cry, to learn and to pray. It will be a place where migrant workers and others in distress can come for emergency help.

"The Sisters have already done so much to help so many build new lives for themselves and their families," Extension President Father Edward J. Slattery said. "They are counting on us for the aid they need to continue their vital work.

"I hope you will lend your support to their efforts by answering our appeal this November with open and generous hearts. Your response will help make a new home for these refugees who have struggled so far just to come here."



One of the fortunate ones to find work with the sisters' help, L'Herrison Seide works late at a part-time job cleaning offices. Though the pay is minimum wage, he is happy to find work to support himself and his family.