

An Instrument of Hope

WHEN DANITA ESTRELLA LEFT FOR HAITI FIVE YEARS AGO, MANY THOUGHT SHE WOULDN'T LAST SIX MONTHS. SHE PROVED THEM ALL WRONG.

Danita Estrella was 10 years old and attending Vacation Bible School (VBS) when she first heard about missionary Hudson Taylor, who evangelized China in the 1800s. His story struck a chord in the young girl's heart, and at the end of VBS, she prayed that God would someday make her a missionary.

Danita forgot about that prayer until 25 years later when she left America and moved to Ouanaminthe, Haiti, one of the world's poorest regions, plagued by desolate living conditions, political turmoil, AIDS and, recently, a devastating hurricane that killed thousands. The only dream of many residents is to escape to a better life in the very country Danita left.

Since 1999 the single 39-year-old has devoted her life to bringing hope via the gospel to this area of Haiti. She runs an orphanage that, before Hurricane Jeanne, was home to 40 children. That number increased this year when Danita took in 26 children left orphaned by the hurricane. She also runs a school at which the students receive daily hot meals, clothing, and most importantly, an education and Bible lessons—what Danita views as key to changing the course of the country.

Danita sometimes thinks of her VBS prayer and how God answered it. "I really honor and encourage VBS workers, Sunday school teachers and parents who teach their children Bible stories," Danita says. "They just never know the impact they're having."

The impact Danita is having in Haiti probably surprises some friends and relatives who didn't think the soft-spoken former

model would last six months. But it's been almost six years, and Danita now calls Haiti her home. "I wouldn't think of leaving," she told SpiritLed Woman. "Do you know what it's like to wake up and know that you have such purpose in life?"

LIVING "THE GOOD LIFE"?

Danita grew up in a Christian home and at age 4 accepted Jesus as her Savior. Her family moved around some—New Jersey, Puerto Rico and then Florida.

She headed to California in her 20s and established a successful career in promotional modeling for clothing and fragrance companies and major corporations such as Coca-Cola. She enjoyed the nice paychecks and exciting big-city nightlife, but she had stopped attending church and was drifting away from God. Even though her parents were now divorced, they were both concerned and praying for her.

Their prayers were answered one evening in 1990 when Danita's nightly trek to the clubs with friends fell through. Instead, she stayed home and found herself taking a long, hard look at her life.

"I was ashamed at what I saw," she says, and ended up crying out to God. "I prayed, 'God, if You are real, change the desires of my heart. Show me what to do with my life.'"

Danita rededicated her life to God and later that year took a job as a flight attendant because the work schedule allowed her time to study and attend Bible school.

In the mid-1990s she moved to Florida and began working at Without Walls International Church in Tampa as an assistant to pastors Randy and Paula White. She enjoyed her job but over time developed a strong interest in missions. With no idea where God wanted her to go, she waited for divine direction.

That came one day in 1998, when Pastor Randy asked Danita to accompany a group of doctors on a medical missions trip to the

Dominican Republic and Haiti. She speaks fluent Spanish, and the doctors needed an interpreter.

Danita jumped at the opportunity, and as the group ministered in Ouanaminthe, she realized that was where God was calling her. After returning to the United States, she announced her plans to move to Haiti— independent of any support or oversight from a denomination or missions board, and with very little money saved up.

The Whites gave Danita their blessing, but other people were not as supportive and predicted she would be back in six months. “They were just very concerned about me and couldn’t imagine me in the mission field,” she says. “It just didn’t match my personality.

“I felt this was a personal decision between me and the Lord, so I just kept quiet and let all of them talk,” she says. “Besides that, I was so hungry for what was real. I wanted to go by myself—to prove God.”

Before leaving, the Whites’ church took up a special offering that raised \$7,000 for whatever Danita’s outreach would be in Haiti. Other than that, all she had was one person’s commitment to send her \$200 a month.

WHY AM I HERE?

Danita arrived in Haiti in January 1999 and spent her first year trying to get to know the people, the culture and the language of Creole. She found a place to live in an empty, bug- and rat-infested classroom that had a dirt floor and no bathroom.

There is no running water, electricity, phone service or paved roads throughout the region. But Danita was more concerned about her difficulty in establishing relationships with the people, who clearly did not know what to make of her.

She had arrived in Haiti with no plans. “I didn’t know I was

going to start an orphanage, school and church,” she says. “I just came because I wanted to serve the Haitian people.”

Danita spent her days walking the streets, trying to get to know people who didn’t want her there and becoming overwhelmed by the street children, hunger and disease. Being a single woman there by herself compounded her loneliness and frustration.

“I was really broken and often cried myself to sleep,” Danita says. “I remember one night I was starting to feel a little foolish. Like, ‘God, thank You for sending me here, but why am I here?’ I could only imagine what people back home were thinking.”

Even so, Danita never thought about returning to the States and eventually started helping out wherever she could in local churches and schools. She also gave these organizations whatever financial support was sent to her because they so desperately needed it.

TIME FOR ACTION

Danita’s breakthrough came a year after her arrival. She was eating lunch at a café where it was common to see hungry, barefoot street children huddling outside. After customers finished eating and left, the children would race to the trashcans and eat whatever had been thrown away.

“There was one tiny little boy,” Danita says, “watching me eat and almost pleading with me with his eyes to give him my leftover food.” She signaled to him to wait because she wanted to buy him his own meal, but as she continued eating, she heard screams and the sound of a whip cracking.

“I looked out the window and saw a man holding a long whip that they use to herd cattle. He had grabbed the boy by the wrist and was whipping him for bothering the customers.”

Danita ran into the street and grabbed the man by the collar.

"I began shaking him and yelling at him to let the boy go," Danita says. The man obeyed and Danita carried the child into the restaurant, where she bought him and his friends their own lunches.

"I walked home that day crying," Danita says. "Then I realized there's a time to stop crying and do something about it."

That incident is what drove Danita to open a home for the area's orphans. "It was a defining moment for me and also the answer to my prayer."

By the next month, February 2000, Danita had opened her orphanage with two children in a rented home. Residents who had been wary of her now took great interest in how her orphans were living.

The people lined up along the fence around the orphanage's yard to watch Danita feed, dress and care for the children. "They were just wishing that they could come in and join us," she says.

Danita soon decided to expand the orphanage to include a school, and that's how Hope for Haiti was born. She started the school with 50 students she had gathered from visiting homes door-to-door. Residents embraced her and asked if they could bring their children to her school, which now enrolls 500 area children.

"Having the school," Danita says, "is a way of saying, 'OK, we can't take in and raise 500 children, but we can feed them, give them shoes and a uniform.'" Hope for Haiti's school offers kindergarten through third grade, and every week children learn—along with academics—a Bible memory verse, one parable, one of Jesus' miracles and a moral value.

RAISING UP THE NEXT GENERATION

Danita is assisted by Nancy Soto, who worked with her at Without Walls and initially agreed to stay for one year. Four

years later, Nancy is still there and has adopted a baby girl from the orphanage.

Karris Hudson, from Tennessee, heard Danita speak at a U.S. church, came to visit two years ago and stayed. Karris runs Hope for Haiti's Sidewalk Sunday School with the help of a Haitian ministry team.

Together, the three American women work with a staff of about 50 nationals that includes 22 teachers, security officers, a school director and a pastor.

Hope for Haiti recently constructed a 500-seat church. They were building a two-story feeding center, with plans for a medical clinic, when the hurricane hit.

Construction progress is slow. Materials are bought as donations arrive, and work often gets done by U.S. short-term missions groups.

But more important than expanding the facilities is Danita's goal to capture the hearts and souls of Haiti's next generation.

"I want these children to stay in Haiti and not think that the best thing that can ever happen to them is to get a passport and leave. I want this generation of children to grow up with a dream—not of leaving Haiti for America but of becoming model citizens and playing a role in turning their country around."

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