

How One Woman Touched a Nation

When Danita Estrella—now Danita Estrella Watts—first arrived in Haiti in 1999, she was 34 years old, single and had very little money. The people there were suspicious of her and not initially receptive to her attempts to befriend them. Although they were warm and kind, they also were cautious with their trust, hopeful that Danita would keep the promises she made unlike other missionaries who preceded her.

Slowly, despite the overwhelming odds, people began to help her. When Charisma heard her story in July 2001, the magazine covered it as a human-interest story. Readers responded overwhelmingly with an offering so large it allowed Danita to begin her ministry, she says. Now two decades later, the story is even more incredible, and Danita gives glory to God.

In the early days, it took a while for the Haitians to get to know her heart through the work she was doing. But today she is a beloved leader in her community of Ouanaminthe, where she heads a ministry—Hope for Haiti Children's Center/Danita's Children—that is making a difference not only in the immediate area but also in other parts of the impoverished nation.

In spite of the turmoil Haiti has experienced recently, Danita's focus is on the children who are suffering and bringing them joy this Christmas. Most years, she has been able to bless the children in her care with special celebrations and gifts. Thanks to donations from compassionate people who are motivated to give generously during this season, the ministry provides gifts each year to hundreds of children, including all the children in the school, the hospital and the children's homes, as well as the children in another local orphanage and those in needy families in the community.

These celebrations are very different from the way Danita spent her first Christmas Eve in Haiti in 1999. She ate her dinner alone in the home she had just rented to use as an orphanage. "All I had was 20 empty beds, my Bible, a suitcase and my lantern," she says. But "my heart was full of excitement." After she finished her meal, she laid her hands on each bed and prayed for the child who would one day sleep there. "Almost all the children who filled those beds the following year are now married or in college," she says, "but [with them] we started a beautiful tradition of bringing joy and laughter every Christmas season." Today that tradition continues in both of the current children's homes and the community—and Danita no longer spends the holidays alone.

In addition, the school hosts a party that includes a holiday program with songs, games and a message about the real reason for the season, and the children's homes serve special meals on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Each child in the ministry's homes also receives a stocking and a card next to their bed on Christmas morning and enjoys a special time of opening gifts—which through the years have included shoeboxes full of surprises and a Bible—with others in their home.

Answering God's Call

At first, Danita didn't know why God had sent her to Haiti. Though she had developed an interest in missions and was seeking God's direction for her life, her only previous experience as a "missionary" was participating in a medical mission trip to the Dominican Republic and Haiti near the end of 1998 that was sponsored by her home church in Florida. Because she spoke fluent Spanish, the church had asked her to go as an interpreter.

Danita was eager to take advantage of the opportunity and while the team was ministering in Ouanaminthe, she sensed that this poverty-stricken town was where God was leading her. "At the end of this trip that I did with the doctors, interpreting

for them, we crossed over [from the Dominican Republic] into Haiti," Danita says. "The moment I crossed over the border and I saw the orphans, I saw the children in the streets, I saw the people sleeping outside, my heart just started pounding out of my chest and I just felt, *This is where I want to be.*"

Two months later, with the blessing of her pastors, \$7,000 from a special offering they had taken up on her behalf and one person's commitment to send her \$200 a month, she packed her bags and moved to Haiti by herself. But she had no plan for what to do when she got there.

"When I came here over 22 years ago, I didn't have a clear direction of where I was going to go, but I had a promise from God: 'Go, and I will be with you,'" Danita says. That promise was enough for her to leave home and settle in a new country with the hope of being used by Him to help the people there.

At first she spent time assisting a local church and school. But after a year, she became restless. "I felt like there was a purpose, an assignment that I had not yet discovered," she says. "And so I remember very clearly that I cried myself to sleep one night. I was praying, and I said, 'God, thank You for sending me to Haiti, but why am I here?'"

His answer came in the form of a Bible passage she happened to be reading (Proverbs 31:8-9, NKJV) she recalls. "It said, 'Open your mouth for the speechless, in the cause of all who are appointed to die. Open your mouth, judge righteously, and plead the cause of the poor and needy.'"

Suddenly she felt as if she had a mission. She decided, "I can open my mouth, and I can plead their cause," she says. "That's what I began to do."

Her first opportunity came when she was eating a meal at an outdoor cafe and noticed a little boy eyeing her food hungrily. He began to inch closer to her, preparing to grab for himself whatever part of her meal she didn't consume.

Before she could offer to purchase something for him, a man snatched the child away and started beating him with a whip. Danita responded instinctively, grabbing the man by the collar and insisting he let the boy go. When he did, she got the child to safety and tended to him.

That day she knew what God was calling her to do. He wanted her to care for homeless children like the one she had just rescued.

Growing Her Ministry

Danita responded by leasing a rental home in Ouanaminthe in December 1999 with the idea of using it as an orphanage. She had no idea how many needy children she would be called on to take in. "There were local people, local pastors in town, and when they heard that I was opening a home for these children, they started bringing them one by one," she says. "And little would I know that even a month later, we'd start with 14 children."

But that was just the beginning. Danita wasn't content only to put a roof over their heads. She knew the children must be fed, clothed, educated and taught about God's love for them. So she committed to meeting all their needs—physical, emotional, educational and spiritual.

Not surprisingly, her ministry quickly outgrew the rental home. In 2001, thanks to a generous donation, she was able to purchase a piece of property for the exact amount of the donation that was large enough to house several future buildings.

Initially, Danita thought she should build a school on the property first because by the time she was ready to start construction, she was holding class for 200 local children—not just the ones living in her orphanage—in a thatched hut, and she felt they needed a more permanent structure. But God had a different idea.

"I remember one day I went out to this property," she says. "I remember whispering and saying, 'Lord, what do You see?'... And I just really felt in my heart that I was going in the wrong direction, that the school was not the first building, that I should first build the church." She sensed that the church "could be a multipurpose building" used for school during the week and church services on the weekends.

Providing a Refuge

The nondenominational church, Hope for Haiti Worship Center, was completed in 2003 but would soon serve as a multipurpose building to shelter victims of natural disasters.

"In 2004 there were floods that devastated the island and thousands of people died in a city called Gonaïves," Danita says. "We went to Gonaïves and we brought a lot of these children on a bus and to live with us, and for a season, they lived in this church." The children slept on bunk beds in the church until they were able to be moved into homes.

"And then again in January of 2010, when the earthquake devastated Port-au-Prince and hit Léogâne ... we helped so many people," Danita recalls. "We had over 75 children, adults living with us ... And you would walk into this church, and it was rows and rows and rows of bunk beds with mosquito nets draped over them."

Danita had no idea how long her church would be used as a refuge for those impacted by the earthquake. "I thought this was going to be for a year or a year and a half," she says. "Little did I know that for 3 1/2 years, that sanctuary that we had built, that church, would be a home for children." For years the pastors held services in the cafeteria or outside and Danita became eager to have the church back. But she knew God had orchestrated the situation.

"I stood in the front door [of the church] one day, and I looked at it," she says. "I thought, *This is the work of the*

Lord. This is a beautiful thing. And after 3 1/2 years, we were able to build beautiful children's homes for our kids. And the families that just needed a temporary place to stay were able to go back to Port-au-Prince."

Expanding the Vision

The church was only the first of many buildings eventually constructed on the property Danita purchased in 2001. As God has provided the funds through donations to her ministry, she has added the Hope for Haiti Children's Center School, which provides a quality primary and secondary education for more than 350 children from the children's homes and the local community; four children's homes; a special needs home; a cafeteria; and a three-story, 17,000-square-foot medical center that provides access to health care for families and children who live locally as well as those who travel from across the country.

The medical center, which treats more than 8,000 patients annually, has on-site radiology and lab equipment as well as a pharmacy. In 2018, the addition of a surgical operating room expanded the capability of the medical staff to treat serious and emergency cases, and the ministry is hoping to add a neonatal intensive care unit by the end of 2021 to address the needs of premature and critically ill babies.

"Thousands of children in Haiti die from simple things like typhoid fever or diarrhea or HIV," Danita says. "And I made a promise that one day we would build a children's hospital where these children wouldn't have to die, where they would be able to get good medical care."

From the beginning, the medical center was intended to help people beyond Ouanaminthe and the neighboring locales. But no one could have predicted how invaluable it would be in the wake of a natural disaster.

When the magnitude 7.2 earthquake hit the southwest peninsula

of the country on Aug. 14, Danita's Children Medical Center sent a medical team of five physicians and two nurses to serve the people most affected. Because of the badly damaged roads, they chartered a plane to take medical supplies and provide the needed care.

All the buildings on the Hope for Haiti Children's Center campus serve a purpose in helping the ministry support its stated mission: to "rescue, love, and care for orphans and impoverished children in Haiti, meeting their needs ... so that they are empowered to become leaders in their communities and nation." The buildings are the focal point for several programs the ministry sponsors including the feeding program, which serves approximately 16,000 meals a month to children living on the campus and those who attend the school.

Fulfilling a Dream

Despite all God has accomplished through her ministry, Danita still dreams of more. In 2019, the ministry received a donation of 106 acres of land about 20 minutes away from the existing campus and she hopes to use it for two primary purposes: a working farm to raise produce—including peanuts—and livestock; and the Life Skills and Leadership Sports Complex. The farm will help sustain the ministry's feeding and malnutrition programs as well as provide a place for Danita's children and the people in the community to learn valuable skills through caring for the crops and animals.

The sports complex will allow the ministry to reach more children through their love for sports. It will be a place "where we can bring children to a soccer field or basketball or volleyball, but also mentor them and disciple them," Danita says.

Not surprisingly, fulfilling these dreams—as well as funding the ministry's urgent needs for additional solar panels; fuel and batteries for their generators, which supply essential

power to the medical center; and provision for the children—will require a great deal of money. But Danita is confident God will provide supernaturally as He has in the past. “I can’t even begin to explain how or where it comes from, [but] He continues to provide for us,” she says.

Danita’s ministry today is a testimony to both her obedience and God’s faithfulness. Because she made the choice to step outside her comfort zone and answer God’s call, she has seen more growth and a greater impact than she could ever have imagined.

But Danita knows it is the lives she has poured into—not the buildings she has built or the land she has purchased—that are the real fruit of her investment. And in this next season of her life, she is compelled to pour into them at an even greater level. She will be following a new mandate: to pass on some of her administrative duties to younger leaders so she can focus on discipleship.

“It’s so easy as founder and CEO of the organization to be focused on processes, procedures, administration, staffing, growth,” she confesses. “But the Lord has convicted me that all that means nothing if we’re not reaching their souls.”

She has always incorporated Bible education into the church and school; but now she wants to ensure that all those the ministry touches know how to apply spiritual truths to their daily lives. Danita’s dream is that fulfilling this mandate will do more for the people of Haiti than improving their earthly situations; it will change them—and the nation—for eternity.

TO HELP: To donate to Danita’s vital mission and support the children of Haiti, please visit .

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