

You Have a Gift From God

If you can read this, you are among the world's privileged. Not because I am a fantastic writer and you are one of the lucky few to be able to read my words, but because you have the blessing of literacy.

I confess this was something I took for granted most of my life. One of my first memories is a feeling of anger and resentment at the Hooked on Phonics program my mother had me use to learn to read. I thought it was too easy and a waste of my time. I wanted to be playing outside, rather than listening and practicing with the tapes.

But I soon realized reading would bring me great joy, and I fell in love with words. Books are some of my favorite and closest friends.

I learned, however, that it wasn't this way for everyone. My brother, one of the smartest people I know, struggled with dyslexia. Thankfully, we lived in a place where he could get help to be able to read despite his difficulties.

But much of the world doesn't have this luxury—yes, that's right, a luxury.

When I first began traveling with LiveBeyond to Haiti shortly after the earthquake in 2010, I quickly began to realize just how much of the population was illiterate. We used translators help in our medical clinics and they would fill out forms for every patient. Many did not know how to spell their own names. The children in the orphanage we support were successful readers and writers because they attended a good school. But most of the people who worked for our organization outside of the professional translators were completely illiterate.

As soon as I moved to Haiti, I was excited to help set up a Haitian Creole literacy program. I wasn't very good at

speaking Creole yet, but the language system is strictly phonetic, so I soon learned the spelling and speaking patterns. Each letter my students learned was a huge milestone. These are adults, beyond the years of childhood “sponge” learning. Each new word is still a struggle for many of my students, but the improvements have been many.

One student always stands out in my mind. *Camille is one of my favorite people. We have *nothing* in common: race, economic status, country, language, etc., but her kindness and her spirit break down all barriers. The joy that she brings to my life and many others will never be quenched. In her mid-50s, she is a loving wife, mother and grandmother. After a few months of hard work during her lunch hour each day, she learned to write her name. She now signs receipts with laughs of glee and was able to sign her own baptism certificate.

My favorite story about her includes her son, *Jan. He received a baptism certificate but accidentally left it at the LiveBeyond base due to all the excitement of his special day. About a week later one of Camille’s friends found the certificate and brought it to Camille to read to find out who she should return it to. The jumps and shouts and laughs that came out of the room brought me running. Once I got the story out of the women that had gathered, we all laughed and cried with pride at sweet Camille’s new ability to read her son’s name.

Kids in Haiti often look to each other for help spelling their own names because their illiterate parents gave their children names without knowing how to spell them. Most mothers in America can’t fathom that. They scrutinize names for months and monogram baby blankets. For a mom not to know how to spell her child’s name is absolutely unheard of in the United States.

My hope is that all children in Haiti will be able to spell their names one day.

My dream is to see a library built that becomes a place of learning and research for all Haitians. It will have a translation center, reading stations, literacy programs for adults, language classes as well as theological, agricultural and medical research centers. I imagine people gathering to discuss new books and ideas in a safe place. I imagine mothers bringing their children in to look through books, spreading a love of knowledge on to future generations. I want people to have a place to learn for themselves and to be able to improve themselves at their own pace.

Illiteracy brings added difficulties of limited job opportunities, as well as increased likelihood of falling easy prey to scams or threats when you can't recognize your name in print. This is a problem that should not exist. I hate that it does.

So under the Lord's guidance, I have felt called to undertake this challenge as my mission here in Haiti. I know that through these efforts we can encourage Haitians to join us in eradicating this problem for themselves and for their country. So many Haitians and Americans have already joined in the effort, and I know many more will join us as soon as they learn how they can help. Together, I know we can make great strides in bringing literacy to all of Haiti, and I can't wait to see what the future holds for this country and this issue.

*name changed

Devin Vanderpool leads the ESL and literacy programs that she established at the LiveBeyond base in Thomazeau, Haiti. She moved to Thomazeau with her husband, David Stallings Vanderpool, in January 2014. Additionally, she serves as the president of IDEA Ops, an organization fighting poverty, poor health and poor education.