

UC Fraternity's Summer Trip to Haiti Is a Life-Changing Experience

In his own words, Sigma Chi member Evan Joel Clinkenbeard describes the poverty and comradeship he discovered during a summer of service.

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Evan Joel Clinkenbeard, of Ft. Thomas, Ky., a 22-year-old fifth-year finance major in the College of Business, traveled to Port-Au-Prince, Haiti with 12 Sigma Chi fraternity brothers last month, as part of a Sigma Chi service trip that has become a three-year tradition. He shares his personal account of the nine-day service experience below.



Evan Clinkenbeard

The morning of departure was filled with the widest range of emotions for the 13 of us. All of us had spent an inordinate amount of time preparing for the trip over the past eight months.

Planning for this trip had begun during the fall quarter, and fund raising efforts began almost immediately following the finalized plans of who would be making the trek in our third mission trip to Haiti in two years. Our trips were coordinated by active Sigma Chi brother, Ben Hoyer, and Dick Taylor of FOCAS Ministries. Our first experience of Haiti was being

greeted and immediately hugged by our host, Pastor Moliere, as we walked to baggage claim. He is a pastor that is responsible for four churches, more than 15 schools and a number of clinics. He is also always smiling and laughing.

As we left the single runway airport, mobs of Haitians were outside the complex hoping to carry our bags for tips. It was very chaotic, and all of us were reluctant to give up our luggage, but we made it to the Methodist Guest House about 40 minutes away with our bags in a truck right behind us. The first drive through Port-Au-Prince was shocking to all of us as we drove on roads with no lines or stop lights and with thousands of Haitians lining the streets. We were given the rules of the Methodist Guest House, and it was clear that for our safety, we would not be allowed outside of the gates after dark.

Day One

The first full day we spent in Haiti was a Sunday. We woke up at about 7 a.m. each morning because the church and work site where we spent most of our time was about an hour drive up the mountain. As we pulled up to the church, we could hear the singing from the service. We were all escorted to the front of the church and actually sat behind the

pulpit. The church was basic as it did not have lighting or anything elaborate. It was just a concrete-encased room that could hold about 200 people, sheltered by a fragile roof.

The service was beautiful, despite us not being able to understand Creole, the language, being spoken and sung. Creole is the spoken language of Haiti; many Haitians also speak French. The service was beautiful because most of the worship was through singing and prayer. Fellow Sigma Chi member Dan Parsons and I spoke briefly to the congregation through a translator. We both thanked the people of Haiti for allowing us to come learn and give a helping hand. It was moving to see the power of Christ in one of the poorest countries in the world. Those who are faithful in Haiti cling to their religion and hold it dearly because that is usually all they have.

At the end of the service, we remained on site to look at the facilities we would be working on. There were three buildings involved:

- A school – The school was two stories with about 14 very small classrooms with no electricity
- The church – The church described above also did not have electricity
- An office building – This building was never used. It was next to the church with nothing inside – no electricity and no inner walls.

The goals of our project were to equip the entire school (each classroom) and the church with electricity and build the inside of the office building so that it would be functional. We had a generator that would be kept in the office building and that single generator would need to power all three buildings. So in order to keep everything connected, we needed to dig trenches between each of the buildings so wires could be kept safely in pipes underground. There would also need to be walls and windows put up inside the office building while the ceiling would need to be plastered. All of this would be accomplished between Tuesday and Thursday.

After the church service on Sunday, we made our first visit to the girls' orphanage. All of the girls were wearing cute dresses and had ear-to-ear grins across their faces as we pulled up in the trucks. As we entered the orphanage, a barrage of 25 girls ran to us and threw up their arms to be held. As soon as all of the guys had one or two girls in his arms, they showed us their little rooms where there were about eight beds in each room. They loved tickling us and playing with our facial hair. The girl I held in my arms took a pinned ribbon off her dress and pinned it to my shirt. I made sure to keep it with me all week and bring it back. We had a blast with them before we were all called downstairs for the girls to sing to us. They sang Christian songs and recited Bible verses to us before we presented all of them with new dresses. The girls in the orphanage were of all ages and were kept by two caretakers. They either arrived there because their parents that passed away or they had parents that could not provide any food or shelter, which was commonly the case.

Aside from the caretakers, there was another girl who was in charge of teaching the girls songs among other things. She seemed to be about 14 years of age and we found out later that she was in charge because she had stayed in this home the longest of any of the girls, 11 years. Most of the girls were between the ages of four and seven.

Day Two: Exploring Haiti

On Monday, we visited two teen-pregnancy clinics and some of the “slum” areas of Port-Au-Prince as well as a juvenile jail. This was more of an educational day for us as we visited each place and prayed for those we saw and met. We needed a guide to find the first pregnancy clinic because it was in the middle of a slum that covered an entire side of a mountain. There were only dirt paths between the homes of thousands of families that lived here. Each family only had a home that was about 12-by-12 feet, and almost none of them had roofs. Everyone was so closely packed next to each other; we all wondered how you could even know the population of this area. There were thousands of these small square areas for “homes.”

The hillside was steep too, which makes me wonder what everyone does when it rains – with mud flowing down the hill and no roofs or electricity. Once we got to the clinic, we learned that the children there were receiving vaccinations. The second clinic that we went to was in perhaps an even poorer place. We had to walk across a riverbed that was extremely dry and filled with garbage for as far down as we could see. Once we got to the clinic we learned about what they did and followed in prayer. In the afternoon, we visited a juvenile, male jail that housed more than 150 kids ranging



Sigma Chi in Haiti

in age from about 10 to 15. We provided all of the kids with hygiene kits because of how crowded the jail is. All of these kids are held in three cells and are in for a variety of crimes ranging from pushing drugs to murder. Their parents typically don't know that they are in jail because there is no way to get in touch with the parents, so the kids must stay. We were told that the youngest boys would only be in there for very serious crimes such as murder.

Day Three: The Hard Work

Tuesday began the work. We made it to the work-site early each morning and began immediately on the goals that were assigned to us. We split off into three main groups so that all of us could be working constantly. There was a team working on the wiring and electricity, a team working on the trenches and pouring of concrete, and a team working on the inside of the office building. The kids in attendance at school had just completed their finals that week, so they were playing on the playground and trying to speak to us in the very few English words they knew. All of them were still obsessed with our facial hair. There were also a number of Haitian men helping us with our projects. They were all very proud and eager to help us help them. We learned from Pastor Moliere and Dick Taylor that the men want to prove that they are just as capable as we are. It is certainly true as we could not have achieved our goals without the constant help of the five Haitian men helping us. They have a very unique way of mixing concrete, as my team learned. All you need is the gravel and rock from the mountain, some cement mix and water. It

seemed to make more of a “glued-rock,” but it worked for what we needed. Everyone that we met while working around the church was über-friendly and wanted to speak to us in English so they could practice their linguistic skills.

We were advancing along our projects on time, which had surprised all of us because of the amount of work that needed to be done and for the fact that most activity would have to be done before continuing on the next stage or step of the project. It was tricky, because all three buildings were connected to one generator, so the power would need to run through all of the buildings together. We were able to accomplish everything before the rain came on Thursday afternoon. We could actually see the rain coming from the top of the mountain where we were, so it was a race to get finished.

Day Five: The Rough Ride

Friday was the day that we would all ride mules up the third-highest mountain in Haiti to visit a kids’ school that had been built by previous FOCAS groups. It was about a two-and-a-half hour journey for our mules, but I think most of us were in worse pain. The saddles were wooden planks that were terribly uncomfortable, but we all made it safely up. All of the kids were thrilled to see us and we talked to them through a translator about staying in school and working hard to attain their dreams and goals. Then we were able to play a little game of soccer against the Haitian boys. The trip down the mountain was tiresome as well. It was sunny and about 95 degrees each day. The farther down the mountain we got, the hotter it was and the less water we had. It was a good thing we were all in shape from three days of hard, intense labor.

Sunday was one of the most memorable days, though. We visited Cite Soleil, which is the poorest area of all of Haiti. There is open sewage, thousands upon thousands of people, ravaged housing, and just nothing that seems to be functional in the entire area that spreads a number of blocks. A few Haitians were not happy to see us there and they let us know that. ***It was sad to see how many people are affected by this level of poverty that leaves people with absolutely nothing. When witnessing this level of poverty I feel everything we have is taken for granted no matter how grateful we say we are.***

After visiting Cite Soleil, we were able to go back to the girls’ orphanage and take all of them to a local playground. They wore us into the ground. We were constantly holding them, twisting them, flipping them, and doing everything we could to have a great time with them.

Monday, we departed Haiti to come back home.

Sigma Chi Participants on Haiti Trip

Jake Butcher

Evan Clinkenbeard

Kevin Corder

Alejo Delgado

Lee Groh

Ben Hoyer

Jason Hutchison

Clay Jamison

Neil Kimmet

Peter O'Toole

Dan Parsons

Ryan Sullivan

Ryan Redleski

Funding for the trip was raised by the Sigma Chi fraternity members. Each fraternity brother raised \$1,500 to cover expenses. Immediately following the service trip to Haiti, Evan Joel Clinkenbeard began a cooperative education experience at Merrill Lynch in Cincinnati, where he continues to work through the summer.