

BY JOHN SPIER



As part of a volunteer group, the author helps rebuild a school in Haiti (1). The project included a large pavilion to shelter students from sun and rain (2). The community celebrates completion of the school after an intense week of work (3).

Building a World Away

The country of Haiti, located on the western portion of the Caribbean island of Hispaniola, between Cuba and Puerto Rico, is just a couple of hours from the U.S. by airplane but a lifetime away in cultural and economic terms. The country has been ravaged by centuries of corruption, exploitation, environmental degradation, and more recently, devastating earthquakes and hurricanes. Most of Haiti's 10 million residents live in extreme poverty with little chance for improvement.

In April, I spent a week in Haiti as a volunteer, lending my construction skills to the rebuilding of a school destroyed by Hurricane Matthew. The project was organized by Haven (havenpartnership.com), a nonprofit founded in Ireland in 2007 specifically to work in Haiti. The charity has a full-time presence in Haiti, promoting education and employment, building livelihoods, opening access to water and sanitation, and providing shelter.

On this trip, I joined about 40 other volunteers of all ages and from all walks of life. We hailed from many different countries but shared a commitment to give back to those less fortunate than ourselves. We spent a hard week working long days in hot, humid, and less-than-comfortable conditions.

As one of the few construction professionals on the site, I was tasked with some of the more complex work. Sharing knowledge with and teaching carpentry skills to other volunteers and Haitian workers was especially satisfying. We rebuilt and replaced roofs at the school and built and installed bookshelves along with blackboards, benches, and other furniture. We built a new kitchen facility and a pavilion for the students to escape the intense Haitian sun and frequent rain. We also repaired and equipped an athletic field, and landscaped, cleaned, and painted the entire complex. At the end of seven long days, we had transformed a ruin into an attractive and functional school facility ready for 220 students and their teachers.

The Haitian people that I met and worked with were unfailingly friendly and optimistic. They take their schooling seriously, as education is one of the only routes available to them for betterment and to escape poverty. Every morning, the children emerge from their dirt-floored, tin-roof houses wearing their immaculately clean, pressed uniforms and walk hand-in-hand to school. On our last day, we opened the gates, and the entire community poured in to see what we had done. The palpable sense of wonder, happiness, and gratitude was overwhelming—one of the most rewarding moments in this carpenter's life.

John Spier owns Spier Construction, a building and remodeling company on Block Island, R.I.

Photos by David Cartwell