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Haitian student's long Lent is over

Melissa Musick Nussbaum | Jul. 6, 2011 My Table Is Spread

On the day people in Joplin, Mo., were searching the ruins for survivors of the tornado, we got a call from a survivor in Haiti. It was Claude Winddcheley Saturne, calling to say, ?My long Lent is over.? He had started college classes that morning in Port-au-Prince.

We first met Winddcheley when he was a student at the St. Francis Xavier School in Fond-des-Blancs in Haiti. Our son-in-law taught him French and English. Winddcheley was one of the boys who gathered on the porch of my daughter and son-in-law?s home after school to draw and practice their reading and writing. It was on that porch where my husband pulled out magazines we?d bought in the Miami airport and read them to the boys. They jostled to get closer to the pictures, marveling at photographs of snow and of tall buildings.

Winddcheley stood out because, in that unlucky nation, he was an orphan, and so the unluckiest of all.

We heard from Winddcheley again a few days after the earthquake hit Haiti in January 2010. He sent out an e-mail to friends in the United States. His college had been demolished. His room was gone. He managed to save his cell phone and his college-furnished laptop. He was sleeping on the streets of Port-au-Prince. He had no food and no money. The rainy season was on its way.

The day the e-mail arrived my husband called me from his office. ?What do you think we should do?? he asked.

I answered him in the shorthand of a long marriage, ?I don?t think we have any choice.?

So we began trying to get Winddcheley out of Haiti and here to our home in Colorado. That was more than 15 months ago.

While Winddcheley was getting set up in ?temporary? tent housing, we were trying to make it impossible for the United States to deny him a student visa.

More than a year later, Winddcheley was still in the tent, its fabric torn from heat and rain, its dissolving threads separated into strips and fluttering like flags in the wind. When it rained, Winddcheley huddled on wooden pallets laid over the mud, awake and working to keep dry. His laptop was ruined in the rain.

For a time, Winddcheley went to the Dominican Republic to live with a friend there. It was in the Dominican Republic that Winddcheley took his English proficiency exam. A native Creole speaker, he took preparatory classes in Spanish for an exam in English. Of the four languages he speaks, Spanish is his weakest. But Winddcheley persevered. So did we.

More than a year after the earthquake, we had guaranteed health insurance and housing for him and enrollment as a full-time student at Pikes Peak Community College. My husband spoke often with Winddcheley on the phone, preparing him for the embassy interview. We enlisted the help of our local congressman, who wrote to the State Department, attesting to our stability and financial security. We wired the nonrefundable fee required for the submission of a visa request. It is only $250, but that is more than many Haitians will earn in a year.

Winddcheley woke early on the day of his interview. He walked to the embassy. He sat behind a thick glass panel during the interview, like a prisoner on visiting day.

The officer at the embassy told Winddcheley they did not believe his college had been destroyed in the earthquake. More long walks. Winddcheley went and took pictures of the rubble. The pictures had date and time stamps. He delivered them to the embassy officer.

My husband went on the Internet and looked up Winddcheley?s former school. Pictures were posted with the word ?Destroyed? superimposed on the images. He sent the pictures to the embassy officer.

Winddcheley?s request for a student visa was denied. We had to send a nonrefundable sum to get the news.

My husband encouraged Winddcheley, said he would make some calls and try to gather more support here for a visa issued there. Another nonrefundable fee. Another early morning walk to the embassy. Another interview behind the shield. This time he was told he must surrender his passport and wait. A decision would be forthcoming.

Winddcheley had already missed the beginnings of the 2010 spring semester and summer session. He missed the start of the 2010 fall semester. The spring 2011 session was just days away.

The phone calls continued. My husband would tell Winddcheley, ?It?s snowing here,? and Winddcheley would ask all about the snow. My husband said, ?The expected high today is zero.? Winddcheley, after a pause, asked, ?Is that Celsius??

We talked about the clothes he would need, the gloves and hats and scarves, all unknown to a young man whose idea of a cool day was 80 degrees Fahrenheit.

We kept the embassy informed of the school deadlines. Yes, yes, we testified with bank statements and notarized college letters, we would not allow Winddcheley to become a drain on the medical, housing or welfare system of the United States. We would be responsible for his transportation and food and clothing.

No, no, we were not trying to bring over a house servant, nor did we have any criminal intent. He would not be a drug mule or a slave. He would be a college student and a guest in our home.

We hired an immigration lawyer. All the documents were in place. We had checked and rechecked the paperwork. After months of practice, Winddcheley had learned a kind of Colorado travelogue talk, all about his new home ?at the base of Pikes Peak, one of the highest mountains in the state.?

It wasn?t a problem with the application. It was a problem with Haiti, and Haitians.

I remember memorizing Emma Lazarus? poem, ?The New Colossus,? in grade school.

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning
  to breathe free ...
Send these, the homeless,
  tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden
  door!

And I can?t stop thinking of the old Motel 6 advertising slogan, ?We?ll leave the light on for you.?

What became clear is that the light beside the golden door has not been left on for Haitians. Instead the Mother of Exiles has hung a ?Do Not Disturb? sign on the knob.

We missed the deadline for registration, then new student orientation. Soon, the first day of classes would pass. My husband said, ?We can?t just ask Winddcheley to hang around waiting for the American embassy to act. Maybe there?s something for him in Haiti.?

He called Winddcheley and taught him a new colloquial expression, ?Plan B.?

Two colleges in Port-au-Prince remain in session after the earthquake. Winddcheley applied to Université Notre Dame d?Haiti and was accepted. But he had to get out of what was left of the tent.

Winddcheley found a house and we sent money for the lease.

My husband?s firm sent a computer to Winddcheley, and Winddcheley?s grace and good humor through it all won over the technical specialist who talked to him on the phone. He told Winddcheley, ?I?ll be your IT guy. If you have any problems, call me.?

We agreed to buy a printer for the computer, but the owner of the store wouldn?t hear of it. He donated the printer and sent it to Haiti.

It?s less a torch, ?whose flame is the imprisoned lightning,? than a penlight, whose beam is weak and whose batteries fail. Still, Winddcheley has a house and a computer and a printer and a school, and friends.

And, for now, his long Lent is over.

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