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Between a lifestyle and a life

Melissa Musick Nussbaum | Dec. 11, 2010

Winddcheley in front of his tent in July

COLUMN

There is a young man in Haiti who is trying to come to the United States. We are trying to help him. January will mark one year since we started the application process for Winddcheley?s student visa.

My husband and I made an appointment to talk to Winddcheley on Saturday morning. We are driving to Denver, and my husband?s Blackberry is synced with his in-car phone system. The audio is set for speakerphone. I have the passenger seat warmer on high to ease the ache in my lower back. I have a bottle of water. While we are waiting for the call we listen to the Sinatra channel on our satellite radio.

We know that Winddcheley is walking to an Internet café near Port-au-Prince. He will pay to use the Internet. He will spend money on this phone call today, and no money on food. Winddcheley does not eat every day. He is always hungry. He hopes the Internet will be up and working at the café. He hopes he won?t walk for nothing. It is no small thing to expend calories one doesn?t have.

The phone rings. We exchange greetings. I am looking out the window into the bright eastern sky as I listen to Winddcheley. We are passing a new development off Highway 83 called ?Flying Horse.? It has a golf course, a fitness center and a clubhouse. ?Flying Horse,? the brick stanchions proclaim, offers more than houses. It offers a lifestyle.

My husband and I have a lifestyle. Winddcheley has a life. He will settle just now for clean water.

Winddcheley and his sister are living in a tent provided by the U.S. government. The tent is falling apart in the harsh sun and hard rain. It was set up as temporary shelter after the January earthquake. It is nearly November.

Winddcheley tells us, ?It is hard. Life is hard.? For Winddcheley, this talk is high drama. He is usually focused on the future, on the next step necessary to make it out of Haiti. He is always grateful for any help we offer. But today he sounds weary. Nightly rains flood the tent. He and his sister spend hours in the darkness standing on a wooden box, trying to keep, if not dry, then at least not soaked. The ground is soggy and fetid. The water is

contaminated by human waste.

Winddcheley has been accepted -- leisurely -- by Pikes Peak Community College in Colorado Springs, Colo.

Winddcheley failed the English proficiency test by a few points. My husband, an able advocate, pointed out that Winddcheley had taken the test homeless and hungry. He had taken a preparatory class meant to give him some advantage, but because he took the test in the Dominican Republic, this native Creole speaker had been coached for an English proficiency exam in Spanish. The low score was accepted ?in light of extraordinary circumstances.? Indeed.

The college had concerns that we could, and would, pay for his tuition. We provided proof of financial solvency. We received a desultory note from an official informing us that Winddcheley could expect to hear from the college ?around the end or near the first of the year.?

My husband, by way of reply, sent a picture of Winddcheley in front of his tent. He pointed out that a young man in the midst of autumn rains and rising waterborne diseases could use a swifter response.

The forms were duly mailed to Haiti. Three weeks passed. Winddcheley walked to the post office in Port-au-Prince. They have not arrived, or perhaps they arrived and were stolen by another desperate man or woman. Perhaps the papers were misplaced.

My husband talks to Winddcheley about getting replacement papers. The embassy will not accept photocopies. The college will have to send new originals. Winddcheley suggests using DHL for the delivery.

We do not understand the complexities of deliveries to a person who has neither a street address nor a post office box. My husband and Winddcheley discuss the next step. After he gets the papers, if he gets the papers, Winddcheley must arrange an interview at the American embassy in Port-au-Prince. Winddcheley has been working toward this interview since January.

On Monday morning, I drive to my local supermarket. I can use my debit card to send money to Winddcheley. I bring my iPad along. There is a recipe for braised beef on my Epicurious app that I want to try. My iPad allows me to check that I have all the right ingredients for the dish.

I stand in line at the Western Union service counter. A clerk takes the paperwork from me. She asks for the recipient?s address. I tell her he has no address. She raises her eyebrows. I say, ?He lives in a tent.?

The clerk asks if I want the ?Money in Minutes? option. I tell her that doesn?t work in Haiti. She asks if I want the ?Next Day? or ?To a Bank Account? or ?To a Mobile Phone? options. I tell her those options are not available in Haiti, asking her to send the money to the Western Union office in Port-au-Prince. I tell her Winddcheley will retrieve the money there.

I give her the card. She enters the information. I look at the receipt where I?ve been listed as both the sender and the recipient. She calls the Western Union office and corrects the name of the recipient. I look at the receipt and see that Winddcheley?s matrilineal name has been omitted.

?His last name?? she asks.

?I?m not sure if it?s his last name,? I tell her. ?I?m not sure if that?s how the Haitians would characterize it.? And I can see that I am telling her more than she needs, or cares, to know. ?It?s his mother?s family name,? I say. Then I mutter, ?It needs to be on the form.?

The clerk calls Western Union again. While she?s waiting for someone to answer her call, she asks me if I send

a lot of money orders. I walk over to the coffee kiosk. I want the clerk to know this is also taking longer than I planned.

The Monday before I stood in line at Western Union, I sat on the tarmac in Dayton, Ohio, waiting for a faulty valve on the airplane to be replaced so that we could fly to Denver. I was irritated by the delay. I caught a 5 a.m. shuttle for this?

I waited until it was 6:30 in Colorado before I called my husband. I let him know I would *not* be able to meet the painters at the house at one. Yes, I sighed, I would call the company and reschedule. I let him know my morning had been wasted. Wasted.

I can tell that the clerk is impatient with me. I persist. I want this money order to go through. I say, ?It?s really important,? in my most concerned voice. I want her on my side. ?It?s very bad down there,? I say.

?Really?? she says. ?What?s going on??

I?m not sure how to answer. Haiti. You know, Haiti? The place we watched fall apart on television last winter? Anderson Cooper looking indignant? Collapsed schools and crushed kids?

I thought surely she had heard the word *Haiti* and pegged me as Lady Bountiful. Now, it seems, she just thinks I?m a woman who can?t send a freakin? Western Union money order. I have become Frontier Airlines, unable to find the errant part, unable to fix the faulty valve.

?Well, there was the earthquake,? I say, folding my paperwork and checking to make sure I haven?t left my iPad on the counter. ?And now there?s a cholera epidemic.?

?Cholera. What?s that?? she asks.

I say cholera is a waterborne disease. People can get sick and die the same day, I say. Drinking contaminated water causes it, I tell her. ?You know, human feces in the water.?

She makes a face. Gross.

I look around. There is a line. People are waiting. They have to get back to work. Me too. I have to find those really sweet organic onions. The braised beef just won?t be the same without them.

[Melissa Nussbaum is an *NCR* columnist who lives in Colorado Springs, Colo.]

Editor's Note: Since this column went to press for the Dec. 10 print edition of *NCR*, there has been an update in Winddcheley?s immigration status. Melissa Musick Nussbaum writes:

We heard from our Haitian friend, Claude Winddcheley Saturne, on December 7. Despite our sponsorship and his letter of acceptance from a local college and having his papers all in order, the American Embassy rejected his application for a student visa. He emailed us that morning:

> I am very sad to inform you that I have been refused the student visa. The interview was excellent though. Now I can imagine how much they don't trust Haitians. The probably think that we(Haitians) won't come back because of the worse condition of life here caused by the earthquake. I am feeling very hurt. And now once again I am wondering what I am going to do, here with no hope, no school, no job, no house, etc. My heart is broken!

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