

President's Insights July 2021

The Université d'Etat d'Haïti School of Optometry in Port au Prince was inaugurated in 2018. Since that time Haiti has suffered a series of setbacks due to social unrest and the COVID-19 pandemic. The first, second, and third year classes have not enjoyed the planned infrastructure improvements such as a functional clinic and they have been falling behind in the teaching curriculum. Just two months ago in May 2021 VOSH/International (V/I) received a generous \$25 thousand dollar grant from Optometry Giving Sight (OGS) to support the students' learning and networking through teaching clinics to be run by VOSH Pennsylvania in Cap Haïtien among other activities. Furthermore, we have strengthened the connections with the Dominican Republic UTESA School of Optometry, including a possible teaching clinic in Dajabon, on the border between the two countries. In an initial effort to implement this project, I planned a three-day visit to review the school's progress, meet the students and team and give targeted lectures on how we run VOSH clinics, including the clinical optometric procedures we perform in the clinics, as requested by the school.

Every international VOSH clinic and teaching trip, such as the V/I Ambassador Program or VOSH Corps, involves risks including potential illness, injury, or social/political unrest. Therefore, we consider the risks and try to minimize them in our planning. I still remember when Ben Konig, OD, faculty member at the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua School of Optometry, had to cut short his teaching appointment when social and political unrest began. My trip to Haiti, although relatively brief, was no different. We utilized the services of Key Travel, specialists in humanitarian travel, and I was generously invited to stay at the home of Dr. Jean Claude Cadet, Dean of the School of Optometry. During my stay I maintained regular communication with the VOSH/International team.

The first challenge was that, perhaps due to the July 4th weekend, the result of the PCR COVID-19 test was delayed -even though I was reassured it will be in time to catch my flight - and I was not allowed to board my flight without it. In retrospect, the rapid antigen test would have been a better choice. This put me in Fort Lauderdale several hours late and I missed my Monday morning flight to Port au Prince. I was able to reschedule for the afternoon but by then the outer bands of Hurricane Elsa were approaching the airport. We waited on the tarmac for twenty minutes as rain and wind shook the aircraft before we were cleared to leave. After a high-powered take off and a few minutes of turbulence, we were airborne above the clouds for a smooth two-hour flight to Haiti.

Upon arrival I was met by Dr. Cadet and whisked through immigration and customs. We drove 45 minutes through Port au Prince to his home above the city. I was treated to a home-cooked meal and given a self-contained comfortable room. I slept well knowing it would be a busy Tuesday of touring the school and lecturing.

The Université d'Etat d'Haïti School of Optometry building was constructed with USAID funding after a devastating earthquake in 2010. The solid block building is one story with an attractive facade. I was met with smiles and fist bumps by students and administration, all wearing face masks due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. I toured rooms where the V/I Technology Transfer Program (TTP) supplied instruments and equipment sit still wrapped

in plastic sheets and in boxes. Madame Mercier assists the students in a large administrative office. There were several classrooms, and one had a projector, screen, audio equipment, and computer connected to Wi-Fi. I met Serge Sicard, an engineer who designed and installed the diesel-powered generator system that supplies electricity to the school when the city power falters. It was encouraging to hear Serge say that with some guidance, he could help set up optometry lanes of chair, stand, phoropter, slit lamp, and visual acuity charts so the students could practice clinical optometric procedures. Often, we forget that local capacities and solutions are readily available if we just pay a little bit more of attention. Talking with Serge reminded me of that.



Image 1. Dr Cadet leading a tour of the school.

I gave two lectures with ample time for questions and discussion with the students. We discussed how a VOSH clinic runs and what clinical optometric procedures would be helpful to know. We had a generous lunch for all administrators, students, and Dr. Cadet. I then delved more deeply into the clinical optometric procedures, including why visual acuity is important to measure and how uncorrected visual acuity relates to refractive error. We discussed the importance of learning retinoscopy. I happily handed over a beautiful diagnostic set with handles and well charger, lens bars, and model eye donated by Heine to the president of the SVOSH chapter there. We discussed the role of optometry as independent primary eye care practitioners. After leaving the school we went to the University Hospital to get the rapid antigen test completed for my planned Thursday departure to the Dominican Republic.

We ended the day at the school in the late afternoon and headed back to Dr. Cadet's home for a delicious dessert of cheese, honey, and biscuits. We were in bed by 9pm, looking forward for another day of stimulating interaction. Dr. Cadet lives in a secure compound so we slept with windows open. With a light breeze coming through the screens, I heard the sound of insects and the call of frogs that sounded more like birds.

I was awakened at 1:35 in the morning by pistol shots, followed by shouting in the distance. I immediately turned my attention to what was happening in the house. Thankfully, what was happening was not in the home or compound but some distance away. I did not hear

footsteps, doors opening, or anyone speaking in the house. So I stayed put and listened. I heard vehicles speeding down a nearby road then automatic gunfire. Several minutes later I heard the booms and high frequency whizzing of large caliber automatic gunfire. Then all was silent once again. The insects and frogs continued their songs. I laid there for quite a while wondering what had happened and eventually fell asleep once again.

I awakened at 5:30 on Wednesday morning, and got ready for the day. As I entered the living room I saw Dr. Cadet descending the stairs. He looked at me and said, "Did you hear the shooting last night?" "Yes," I said. He said, "The Haitian president was killed and first lady wounded. We will stay in today. A state of siege has been declared." We had breakfast, neither of us speaking a word. Dr. Cadet listened to the Haitian news in French. After our meal and coffee, each of us returned to our respective areas. He said, "Let's meet at 10 in the morning to discuss what to do next."

When planning this visit, an assassination did not feature in our thinking. I immediately communicated with Maria, V/I Executive Director, notifying her of the circumstances. She clearly understood the importance and potential ramifications of what had happened. Years earlier, when Aristide's presidency ended in a coup, civil unrest erupted for several weeks. When Dr. Cadet and I met later in the morning he said the airport was closed and the land and sea border with the Dominican Republic had been closed, patrolled by army and navy. "We must sit tight and wait in the safety of the compound," he said. I spent my time communicating with the VOSH/International team, Key Travel, family and friends. Maria notified our Dominican Republic colleagues at the UTESA School of Optometry, my next planned stop on the trip, and they immediately began working on a diplomatic evacuation flight that I would be invited to join.

Dr. Cadet and I had lunch in the mid-afternoon then rested. In the quiet early evening hours we met for a walk in the safety of the compound. I joined him wearing my sandals. We walked in the 30-meter driveway for ninety minutes, back and forth, discussing the optometry program and his days in medical school, residency, and early career. He had trained and worked in Jerusalem and in the United States. At the end of our walk he said to me, "Dan, if you walk barefoot, it will be good for your health and open your heart." We met later for tea and dessert.

The next day was much the same. Communication was constant in spite of having lost our internet connection in the neighborhood. At least the message applications of my phone still functioned. Trying to get me out of Haiti was a priority in everybody's minds. I joined Dr. Cadet once again for our evening walk. This time I joined Dr. Cadet barefoot. Upon seeing me, he smiled. Later, he told me the airport would open in the morning. His son had a confirmed ticket to Florida and we could all go down to the airport together. The only issue was that, even though I had tried, I was not able to secure an airline reservation.

We arose earlier than normal. In the quiet and darkness of an early Friday morning we drove down the narrow roads toward Port au Prince. We passed three burned out trucks on the

side of the road that had been used in the assault. I was relieved that there were no police or military checkpoints. We arrived at the airport at six in the morning before sunrise. I said goodbye to Dr. Cadet and thanked him. I was able to enter the airport with Dr. Cadet's son. The idea was to speak with the airlines to see if there were any empty seats out. American Airlines was all booked up, Jet Blue canceled their flight, and the regional airlines to the nearby Dominican Republic were closed. By now it was afternoon and the prospects looked bleak. The diplomatic evacuation was taking longer in spite of all the follow up from our colleagues at UTESA. I was able to find internet access at the small airport café and I booked a flight out through Key Travel for Monday.

I notified Dr. Cadet and he insisted that he come to pick me up. I waited in the café. Fifteen minutes later I received a call from Dr. Cadet and he said, "Please go find Wouk at American Airlines." "Wouk? I asked. "Yes," he said, "Find Wouk." So I headed out and found the first American Airlines employee I could see. She

was very friendly, but did not know anyone named Wouk. I got back on the phone with Dr. Cadet then handed over the phone. "Oh, Wouk! Yes, I know where Wouk is," she said. "Just exit the airport terminal and it's the office on the left." I headed out and waited in line.

After a few minutes working with Wouk, she said, "Would you like to leave now?" I said, "Yes!" Wouk said, "There is a flight leaving in 1 hour. You have time to check in and get through security." I was grateful. I had my tickets in hand and Dr. Cadet walked me to the airport entrance. For the second time, we said goodbye and I thanked him.

I was standing at the American Airlines counter checking in when I felt a presence by my side. I looked over and Dr. Cadet was standing next to me. "Hello again!" I said. The customer service agent asked for my tickets and negative COVID-19 test. She seemed especially interested in the COVID test. She looked at it carefully. She walked away from the desk through a door into an office. When she left Dr. Cadet said, "Do you have a University identification card?" I thought for a moment and said, "Yes, I have what's called a CAT card – named after the University of Arizona Wildcats." I got it out of my wallet. It shimmered with a hologram of a U of A Wildcat.

When she returned, Dr. Cadet took control. He said that he was the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine and School of Optometry, and that he personally had arranged for the COVID test.



Image 2. Dr Cadet's garden.

He said I was an invited professor and he showed her my CAT card. She seemed impressed as she studied its details. She quickly approved the COVID test results, handed me my boarding pass, and waved me over to the security check line. For a third time, I thanked Dr. Cadet for his gracious hospitality and I said goodbye. As I exited the security check area and turned the corner toward the gate, I could see him waving goodbye. I took the elevator up to the second floor and within minutes we were boarding the plane for Miami. My seat was 33F, the last row, window seat. I sent a WhatsApp message to Maria, letting her know I was on the plane so she could inform the VOSH/International team

Once I arrived in Miami, I got the call from the Dominicans notifying me I was approved for the evacuation flight. I let them know I was in Miami. They were pleased that I was safe on home soil. I was grateful for their commitment to help me out. I have a pending visit to the school there that I hope to honor soon.

This was a challenging visit but I was safe and well taken care of by Dr Cadet, his family and his team. I think about the daily challenges they face and the strong commitment they have to make their country better through higher education. Our commitment to the Université d'Etat d'Haïti School of Optometry, the students, staff, and faculty remains strong. We will soon review our plans with our Haitian colleagues in view of the recent events. We will do all we can to ensure the security of all involved in the project while delivering our best clinical expertise to the students. My sincere hope is that after the elections, peace and stability will return to Haiti. There will always be challenges in Haiti and VOSH/International will continue thinking outside the box to support the development of optometry in Haiti through supporting sustainable eye clinics, the optometry school, optometric education and increased collaboration with our chapters in the region.

This visit opened my heart to Haiti.

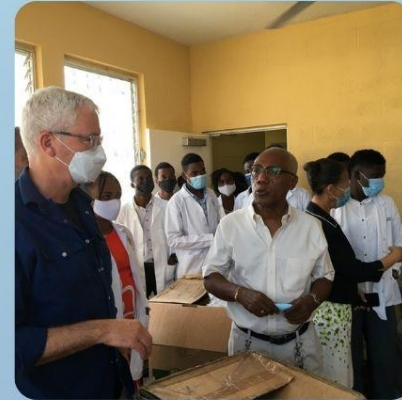
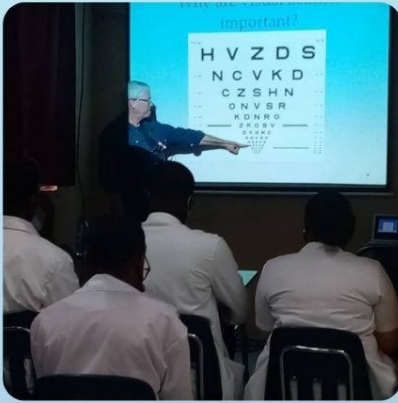
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For more information:

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Visit to the Haiti School of Optometry