

St Lucia Journal – a first time visitors account – Toni Schmitt

Jan 20, 2012

a.m. Today is the first morning for St Lucia #2 group. It is all about getting our bearings and information about what the two weeks ahead of us will bring. All flights went well yesterday and all arrived safely.

p.m. It's late afternoon and Peggy introduced me to a few of the Island workers in the Pastoral Center. We all have been given duties to do while we are here, and one of mine is being banker...exchanging US money for EC(Eastern Caribbean) and holding personal items in a safe place. I also am in charge of AM food service. Now I get to see what it's like to be up and going early! We are setting the 'schedule' for the week and I look forward to visiting some of the institutions on the Island.

Jan 21

a.m. We headed into Castries today to visit the famous Market Place. There were many souvenirs for sale including T-shirts, carved wood and stone pieces, Island crafts, Spices of the Island and a Farmers Market, a colorful sight with friendly, but not too pushy, vendors. This particular area was filled with many brightly colored umbrellas which matched the brightly colored fruits and veggies. It was a true 'photo op'. My purchases consisted of lettuce and tomatoes, vanilla beans, nutmeg, a cocoa stick (to grate in warm drinks) and almond essence. You can see where my thoughts are - food! We returned to the Pastoral Center and had a great lunch, (highlighted by salad and tomatoes), leftovers from yesterday, carrot sticks, sandwiches and fresh mangoes. There was so much to eat! This afternoon we will head out to the sites of the 3 houses that we will build during our stay. All three of the houses are being sponsored by volunteers that are in our group, currently, so there will be a lot of emotional *Thank You's* when they are finished and dedicated.

p.m. This afternoon we visited the sites for the future houses. The first site was not the ideal spot (and later was 'scrapped'), as it is quite a bit up a hill, quite a distance from where the van can reach. We arrived at the location in the van to a smattering of rain...just as we were exiting the vans. A few of us hustled out and started up hill, along the two vague tire tracks filled with rocks and dirt. As the rain picked up and gradually became a summer rainstorm, I kept my head down and continued to watch my steps as I was heading up the hill but lost sight of those I was following. *Ignorant to house site conditions, I neglected to wear my sneakers, thinking that my Speedo sandals would be just fine.* It soon became apparent, as the dirt turned to mud and the grassy medians began to become slippery, that my footwear was not the best choice. I caught sight of two others ahead of me as we all continued up the mountain...in what felt like a 1/2 mile upward hike. Midway, the center thong of my sandal gave way, but thankfully the sides supported me. Taking a few moments to catch my breath every 100 feet, the three of us decided that we must have missed the house site, as this would be crazy to try and build up here, but we plugged on.

Reaching the top of the mountain we looked around, did not see those that hiked ahead of us and decided to descend. (Much easier, by the way, AND the rain had stopped). About 2/3 of the way back down, we saw a 'side road' (and I use that term loosely) and a few other Good News members. Apparently we were so intent on our ascent, we missed the turn. The location IS a bit off the beaten track, and will be a challenge to build on, but we made it finally. Just a good afternoon stroll. The other two sites we visited will be much easier, relatively, to work with and the afternoon was a good one. We ended the trip with a visit to the dental 'clinic' that Jennifer Havel DDS will be using this upcoming week. The fresh paint looks great and the room is clean and airy. Jen's pretty excited.

Our afternoon of visits went well and I got to see more of the island. I definitely know that I DO NOT want to drive here! The steering wheel is on the left side of the car, they drive on the left side of the road, the roads are very narrow and there are too many cars...AND I have not even been out during the workweek - they tell me that Monday's traffic is really congested. We have a church service tomorrow at the Cathedral - a children's service - and the dress code is fancy. Islanders take their 'dressin' for the Lord' very seriously. I am told that many church-goers dress as if every Mass were Easter Sunday Mass. I look forward to being a part of that.

Jan 22

a.m. We went to Mass at the Cathedral in downtown Castries this morning, and I enjoyed it immensely. Since English is the spoken language, there was no problem whatsoever participating. The Good News Group was acknowledged along with a group of about 30 people who were celebrating the Anniversary of their First Communion, in 1959! Since this was a Children's Mass, Father came down to talk to the kids about the readings and the Gospel. It was both enlightening and entertaining.

p.m. After lunch we headed to the Children's Home to do a brief introductory visit and see what will need the attention of GN members (doors, bathrooms, plumbing) at a later date. We then drove to Babonneau to see a different site for one of the houses as the 'hilly' on will not happen this year. Before dinner a bunch of us went to the beach for a nice swim/float. It was my first time at the beach, as others had already gone and a few go quite regularly. It is a 15 minute walk uphill, then downhill. We even stayed for the sunset! It was overcast and a bit windy but nice none-the-less. Tomorrow will be a busy day with some members starting the Williams sister's home (house #1), some visiting Marian Home for the Elderly and Upton Gardens center for abused girls and others staying at the Pastoral Center to do some painting on house #2. We will be scattered about.

Jan 23

a.m. Our first full day 'missioning' (not necessarily speaking the word of God, but rather by letting our actions speak for themselves!) went very well. I got to spend the morning at Upton Gardens center for troubled and abused teens and the afternoon at Marian Home

for the Elderly. In the morning we led the girls in yoga breathing followed by Zumba-like exercises then a cool down period. The girls (10 of them) willingly participated, with a couple of them taking the lead and teaching some new dance moves. After that we split the group in half and my group worked with beads - making bracelets and necklaces. It was fun to see how excited the girls were to make items they could wear to be 'pretty'. I spent time with a girl by the name of Tonisha who made a bracelet with alphabet beads spelling her name. She was tickled to see that the first four letters of her name spelled my name. Now we are best friends! The other half of our group sang songs and read stories.

p.m. After eating our sack lunch - packed beforehand - we visited the Marian Home for the Elderly. We had an afternoon of hugs, positive comments, hand holding and sing-a-longs. We even took along some percussion instruments. Many of the residents could not participate with the instruments but smiled and sang along. Many told stories of their families, their homes and their 'aches and pains'. It was so wonderful to see that a simple hug and a few kind words by our members made their day! One particular lady kept telling me that it was by God's blessing that we were there with them, and that God will bless the rest of our trip. It was a humbling and energizing experience. A comment from one of our members was that it was refreshing to walk into, and through, an elder care home and not smell antiseptic and urine - everything was open air and the breeze flowed through very well.

Jan 24

a.m. We went to the Women's Prison today - Bordelais - I spent the day with 6 other gals and 3 guys traveling the 1 1/2 hrs to get there. Bordelais is situated on a very high point on the Atlantic side of the Island. The 8 women that are incarcerated really enjoyed the one-on-one time as well as the gifts we brought (novels, bibles, chapstick, toothbrushes and toothpaste). We did some exercise, beading/crafts, hand and arm massage and lots of talking. I received many smiles and hugs. Our men, however were greatly outnumbered (about 80 prisoners) so they did larger group activities like Bingo and table card games, and still spent some time just talking and listening. We left right before they had their lunch and stopped on the way back for our lunch at a roadside stand with a view of an Atlantic. To get to the prison, we drove into high elevations (rainforest) and left our lush side of the Island for a more arid side. There were signs of heavy rains, where the narrow roads had washed away one of the two lanes of traffic, leaving a huge dropoff. They were well marked, but still could be pretty dangerous. Bob our driver is a cautious driver and many times he was passed him up. I felt very safe traveling with him. When we got back I did a bit of painting (I now have paint pants) in the back yard of the Pastoral Center and will sit and read (in the shade) until dinner. The day is sunny, but always with a little breeze.

Jan 25

a.m. Today was a busy, exciting, fun filled day as we got to work with classrooms of schoolchildren. The 1st, 2nd and 3rd grade students at Marchand Primary School were eager to get new ideas from different people than the ones they see every day - we did fingerplay, rhymes, stories and music. So many young smiling faces! They all ran to meet us at the door of their classroom and gave great hugs - freely. Although their school is one of the poorer ones, they seemed happy enough and acted just like the kids back home. The time just flew! Since Good News members stop in between 4-6 times during January and February of each year, they know to expect a fun time. Some of the kids remembered a few of our group that visited last year. When it was time to leave each classroom, the kids did not want to let us go...more hugs! A few of the girls wanted to touch my hair to see the differences in the texture. Since it was back in a braid, they were happy to touch the bangs.

I got to talk with a few 6th grade boys at lunchtime, and they were excited and nervous to be going to the high school next year. They have girlfriends already and knew how to handle themselves. That particular group will go far as they were very friendly, but real schmoozers. They were very polite and respectful, too.

p.m. This evening we ate dinner at the Beach Facility - a local restaurant with great food. It was served buffet-style with a choice of fish or chicken, plus lots of great sides, including au gratin potatoes and french fries! After dinner there was some dance music and those in the group that were not already tired out from the day did some dancing. Others of us took a walk on the beach...what more could you ask for?

Jan 26

a.m. Today I went with a group of ladies to Dunnottar School - for developmentally disabled kids. It is situated on a hill overlooking 'downtown' Castries and the port that the cruise ships dock in. It is an old Mansion and has been renovated well for the school purposes. (I would have loved to have seen it as a private home... - it must have been grand!) We had about 45 minutes with the real little children so we did some fingerplay, some songs and a few stories. Then we worked with the older children, I would guess their ages between 7 and 12. They, too, liked the singing (especially Joan's song "My dog loves chips") and the fingerplay. After that we sat them down with new shoelaces and larger wooden beads. They all were able to make necklaces that they were so proud of. When our jewelry project was finished we went outside and did some dancing and exercising in the grass (and the sun). Back inside we calmed them down by reading a book about a hedgehog in the snow. It seemed to cool us down, but the kids really did not get the concept of mittens, a hat and a scarf. Too bad we could not have brought them a snowball!

p.m. After we ate our bagged lunch we had some time with the oldest kids at Dunnottar. Surprisingly, they enjoyed much of the same things that the young ones did, singing, necklace making and many hugs. It was a greatly rewarding day.

Late night in St Lucia. Our group went out for ice cream in Rodney Bay, then to a resort The St Lucia that boasted an 8 piece steel drum band. They played in an open-air lounge and many members danced along to the fantastic music. The evening was balmy with a slight breeze - perfect!

The area of the Island, Rodney Bay, where many of the resorts are, is a whole different place than what we have been seeing daily. It is much more tourist-y, with well lit avenues, a shopping mall, restaurant chains and even a casino. I would suspect that many visitors come to St Lucia and never even venture outside of this little community. It's a beautiful area with some of the flavor of St Lucia, but not quite the whole picture. But, I'm sure the same can be said for many tourist resorts.

We all enjoyed the evening but it felt good to come back here to get a good night's rest. We have another busy day tomorrow.

Jan 27

a.m. A group of 6 of us went to the Boys Center - a home for boys that have had problems with the law but not enough to be sent to prison. Our group leader, Don Schnelle, started out with exercises - old fashioned exercises like jumping jacks and squat thrusts. As you can quite imagine, the boys did not willingly participate. But Don has a commanding voice and an unyielding spirit, so most of them joined in. After that we all went down to the soccer field for a 3 hour 'games' event...relay races, capture the flag, waterballoon toss and my favorite, 'pass the coconut between the legs'. That particular game was the one I joined in as we had an uneven number of players. Our team was well ahead and I was the last player to grab the coconut and run to the front...until I lost my footing and did a somersault and landed on my butt. Although quite humorous, we lost.

The day was sunny and hot but a great breeze was blowing. I did get a bit sunburned, but not too much. At noon we ate our lunches then had a half hour of singing, with guitar, before being driven home.

This afternoon the entire GNP #2 group, plus some local helpers, went to bless the two houses that have been finished earlier in the week. It was very emotional as the house recipients were asked to give a few words, and the volunteers who donated those houses spoke as well. Joan and Kathy donated one house and Carol and Marge donated the other. The evening was spent puzzling, playing cards and banagrams. It was a great social environment allowing further interaction with each other.

Jan 28

a.m. Saturday in St Lucia is a 'play' day. I went to the Market today with a few others and we all bought ingredients that, when combined, made great guacamole! (The avocados are huge!) Jen bought fresh flowers for our table and a mango. After the market, a group of us went out for lunch at Cafe Ole, a great lunch spot, and headed to Pigeon Point National Park with some hiking areas as well as a beach. The park reaches into Rodney Bay on one side and the Atlantic Ocean on the other. The day was sunny but with a good breeze

coming in off the ocean side of the Island. A very short walk away was a beach on the calmer Bay side. We hiked up to the top of the Point, where the remains of a fortress stands, and we had a complete 360 view of the top of St Lucia. We could see the Pitons in the far distance, along with Martinique 25 miles away. We headed back and found some beach chairs to reside in for the afternoon. Boats of all shapes and sizes were anchored in the bay so there was much to see. One of our members asked for my assistance with his newest 'toy', a kite. After a few failed attempts on the beach, we walked towards the Ocean and found an expansive lawn that worked perfectly. Although the wind seemed a bit too gusty to me, it was perfect for the kite. He soon had it doing figure 8's, and left and right circles. It was good fun, but then we headed to the beach chairs and some relaxing shade. Immediately upon returning we fixed a large batch of guacamole - a hit with this group. We had an early dinner then headed to Mass, as tomorrow is a big day on the water. Almost the entire group is going on the sailboat trip to Soufriere. There is much organizing and packing, and everyone has a job, or two, to do, but I am told it will be a lot of fun.

Jan 29

a.m. Today was a blast! Our group of 35 sailed down the Eastern Coast of St Lucia from Rodney Bay to Soufriere. The sailboat/catamaran was huge and could have held about 15 more people, so there was plenty of room to walk around. The sailing took about 2 1/2 hours one way and when we docked in Soufriere, I went to Diamond Falls and the Botanical Garden. Our tour guide was very good at pointing out all of the different flowers and trees and variations of them and explaining a bit about each one. After the 1 hour stop, we re-boarded and headed back up the coast to a beach, near Ti Kaye resort for a 2 hour visit. Some people snorkeled, some went in the water, and others, like me, walked around, checked out the resort and enjoyed the view from up above (166 steps up). We bought Mango juice over ice and looked down on the bay. Beautiful. We re-boarded the boat for the ride back. Since there was a great wind, the waves were choppy but that just created some extra splash-back. A good time was had by all! We ate on the way down and came 'home' to soup and grilled cheese sandwiches (I made the sandwiches) for dinner. (And I think almost everyone was in bed early).

Jan 30

a.m. Today was a learning day for me, I stayed 'home' with Peggy and she baptized me with a lot of information on how to be a trip leader. I did some banking with Chuck, we dropped off some mail at the Post Office, and finally we headed to the Mega J store, much like our Sam's Club. When we returned to the Pastoral Center, I was given some of the tasks that Peggy does with instructions on how to do them. I learned a bit about what it takes to organize a group of this size...a huge undertaking. I also had the opportunity to meet with a St. Lucian who is in need of a house. He stopped into the Pastoral Center to see how to go about applying for a house. Francis cannot read or write, his girlfriend is 6 months pregnant and the shack he is currently living in is falling down. The doctor told him that he cannot bring his newborn into that

environment...it is not clean enough and it does not have enough protection from the elements or from outsiders. His story was a heartwarming one, and I had him fill out an application for a house. Since GNP gets many such applications each year, there is no guarantee that he will get a house, and certainly not this year. There is a St Lucian volunteer here on the Island, Noella, whose works closely with Good News. Her job is to collect applications and talk with the applicants and decide which ones will be recipients of a house in January/February. Not only is 'need' considered, but also if they own the land to build on. I do not envy her job as I was ready to give Francis a home yesterday and there is so much need down here.

January 31

a.m. A busy Tuesday...I went to the Missionaries of Charity today and spent time with elderly and disabled people. We sang songs, Don said the Rosary with the group, and we made paper snowflakes (if you can imagine!). I read books to some of the ladies who could not participate in the crafts, then fed lunch to Destiny, a 90 year old bedridden lady. The day was a test of patience, and I succeeded.

p.m. This afternoon we returned to the Pastoral Center so the group could prepare for our 'Farewell Celebration' tonight....a short prayer service followed by an entertaining program then ice cream for everyone! Many people were invited to attend... workers from all of the places we visited this week (Boys School, Nursing Home, Marchand School, etc) as well as the staff from the Pastoral Center. The skies opened up with a smattering of rain, right before the event started so a few decided to stay home, but we had about 65 in attendance. Two 5 gallon pails of ice cream were almost gone by the close of the evening. It was a fun night of entertainment and socializing.

Feb 1

a.m. This morning I finally got to work on the finishing (painting) of one of the 3 houses our group built during these 2 weeks. The house was sponsored (paid for) by Mike and Renee Sellman in honor of Chuck and Peggy MacCarthy's 50th Anniversary, and will be lived in by a woman named Madeline and her 3 children. The house is 12' X 16' (about the size of a small Master Bedroom in the US) and does not have a bathroom. It does have bunkbeds for the kids plus a table and 4 chairs. Madeline will bring her own bed. *Imagine a complete house in that space!* Madeline currently lives with her middle son, in a small house in the drug-ridden area of central Castries. Her other 2 children were living with family members, and now they can all be together.

Late this afternoon our entire group went back to the house for a House Blessing and I got to meet her children. There were many tears of joy. It was a heartwarming event.

Tonight will be dinner in Coubaril, at a retreat run by nuns which is open to the public. Visiting Benedictine nuns stay there when visiting St Lucia. This event was a traditional

'last night' event. The buildings and church overlook the coastline to the West and I am told we may see a beautiful sunset. We were able to walk through the chapel before our meal. Homemade veggie pizza and salad was served, along with fantastic banana cake for dessert. After dinner was a closing 'ceremony' presented by Chuck and Peg, thanking many individuals and presenting a small gift to all of us 'newbies'.

This whole adventure has been very eye opening, as to how 'the other half' lives, and life-changing. I started this trip with some trepidation and very little expectation (other than to help others). I ended the trip with so many 'gifts' ... I became friends with many volunteers from the US as well as volunteers from St Lucia. I met many St Lucians who live every day in a simple, and God-filled, existence. Their needs are few and they enjoy meeting new people. Kind words are exchanged, along with hugs, as a matter of daily life...they aren't too busy to perform such simple tasks. Plus, I learned to appreciate the gifts I enjoy every day. I heartily recommend this to anyone who has thought about doing mission work but was afraid. This trip was organized, safe and rewarding, not to mention fun! It is the perfect blend of work and free/vacation time.

In St Lucia, our daily schedule starts out around 6:45 with the early risers enjoying breakfast. At 7:15 there is a 15 minute prayer service in the Chapel, and any volunteers can choose to lead the service. *We had a diverse group of religious beliefs in this group of 20, from Quakers to Catholics to Lutherans. Although the prayer service is optional, many have attended. Some of the services we have had involved singing, some reading from the bible and one was a silent, reflective, service. Some are even a combination of all three!*

When the service is over, we head back up to the Pastoral Center (about 30-40 steps away) and a warm breakfast is provided. Afterwards you pack our own lunch for the day. Water coolers are filled and marked so that each group has one to travel with them. There is a chalkboard posted each day with the schedule - who's going where, at what time, etc. Some of the group stays behind and does the cutting and painting of lumber for the houses.

We trickle in from our 'jobs' later in the afternoon and there usually is time for a swim at the beach, a short nap, or down time to read a book. At 6:30 dinner is brought up to the Pastoral Center for the entire group. After dinner we have a meeting going over what happened this day and discussing what will happen tomorrow (sometimes this can take an hour!) It's all very organized. What a way to be a volunteer and not have any worries.