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Rye couple makes Haiti's rebirth their mission

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When **Jim Willey** retired from a successful business career in 2001, he didn't expect to start a nonprofit organization, go back to work as its chairman ... or fall in love with an entire country.

Willey is the founder and president of Help For Haiti, a nonprofit that officially opened in November. The organization's aim is to revitalize Haiti's economy and people through a three-pronged strategy focusing on food, education and business aid. Its motto: "Feed. Educate. Employ."

Willey knows from business; he's a former divisional vice president with the Polaroid Corp. who later co-founded the **Willey** Brothers company in Rochester. Retired in 2001, he grew bored after a few years -- until a Florida pastor asked for a volunteer to go to Haiti to check on the status of some donations.

He flew to the city of Cap Haitien and found a world he, like most Americans, barely knew existed.

Before the country's disastrous floods in 2008 and the even more devastating earthquake last January, Haiti already was suffering, **Willey** said. "The disasters," he noted, "brought it to our national stage."

Of his first visit, **Willey** said, "I could not believe people could live like that."

He stayed in a small French hotel, which was under armed guard at night. There was no electricity at night, and with the exception of a few places, such as his hotel, no sewage system. In a city of a million people, small children wandered the streets alone.

Willey came home, but Haiti never left him, "and my wife, Betsy, and I decided to take it on as a project," he said.

The project became a mission and soon involved other people.

New approach

Willey went back to Haiti several times and became friendly with a young man named Nelson Jean-Denis. In his early 30s, well-educated, English-speaking and a Christian churchgoer, Jean-Denis nevertheless was unable to get a job, **Willey** said.

"He survives on what I send him, \$100 a month," **Willey** said. "The average Haitian survives on half of that."

Willey gradually learned that while well-intentioned Americans sent food, clothing and sometimes money to Haiti, the aid didn't get to the root of the country's biggest problem.

All that aid "was 'doing things' for Haiti," **Willey** said. "It wasn't helping them

become successful."

Wanting more for his adopted country, **Willey** adopted the old "teach a man to fish" strategy. He brainstormed with Betsy and other concerned people and developed a three-pronged strategy that became Help For Haiti.

Foremost, **Willey** said, "we believe in feeding kids."

Haiti's children, who are often protein-and carbohydrate-deprived, frequently fall asleep in school. Help for Haiti aims to give the nation's school children at least one good meal a day, at a cost to Americans of 24 cents a meal.

To meet that aim, Help for Haiti has partnered with a Minnesota organization, Feed My Starving Children, that provides the elements for the meals. The Willeys' church, Bethany Church in Greenland, will put the meals together.

On a May day yet to be determined, Bethany parishioners and other volunteers will put together 100,000 meals for Haiti's children. Help for Haiti has pledged the \$24,000 needed for the meals, but donations are welcome to defray the cost.

What **Willey** desires most, though, is participation. "We need to get people to understand the situation," he said, "and hands-on is the best way."

Willey also is passionate about education and educators. The average teacher in Haiti's rural schools, he said, earns between \$200 and \$300 a year. Meanwhile, he added, the buildings in which they teach have dirt floors, sagging walls and often tarps for roofs.

Help for Haiti, **Willey** said, will try to provide teachers with better support and improve their school buildings. And building projects, he said, will involve local contractors and laborers, something other programs don't do.

"They say, 'We'll put up a school for you.' That's not what we want," he said.

What **Willey** and Help for Haiti want is to put Haitians to work -- hence the organization's third prong: business support and job creation.

(More on the business aspect of Help for Haiti will be found in tomorrow's New Hampshire Union Leader.)

Although other commitments have prevented her from visiting Haiti, Betsy **Willey** is a full partner in her husband's work.

"I thought it was a great idea," she said of the nonprofit. "**Jim** had been going down for a few years, and I was well-acquainted with the needs when he decided to form the corporation." She said she plans to finally visit Haiti this February or March.

Did she think they'd spend their retirement doing something like this? Betsy **Willey** said she wasn't really surprised. "**Jim**," she said, "is not a sit-still person."

The project helps her live out her Christian faith, Betsy **Willey** said, because "we're meeting people's needs, whatever they are."

Willey isn't a pastor or a missionary, he emphasized. "I'm a Christian businessman." He will use his business skills to negotiate how many laborers are needed to put up a school, how much lumber to order and more.

He'll also use his business savvy, and Christian principles, to protect any donors. There is no paid staff at Help for Haiti; everyone is volunteer, and

there's little or no overhead. At least 90 percent of all donations will go to children's meals, educational interests, or business loans, he said. "We need maybe 10 percent for legal work and other expenses," he said.

The group recently filed for 501C3 status and has seven board members, he said. "My responsibility," **Willey** said, "is to be a good steward."

He began seeking funds in November and has already raised \$14,000 from friends and business associates.

Those wanting to help can work on several levels, **Willey** said. They can help pack food at Bethany Church in May. They can donate money, which he will personally see delivered to the food program, school or small business.

Or they can go with him for what he calls an "immersion program." He is ready to escort potential supporters on a three-day trip to Haiti, to see the need in person. Airfare is about \$400 from Florida, he said.

From his business experience, **Willey** knows that things don't happen overnight. He's not looking for immediate change in Haiti, but he has a 20-year vision for revitalizing children's lives, schools and businesses.

"It's an investment," he said.

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For more information, visit www.helpforhaiti.org.

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