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Beacons of hope’ from Port-au-Prince

HAITIANS ARE FIRST
INTERNATIONAL MEMBERS
OF DUKE YOUTH ACADEMY

BY DEBBIE SELINSKY

There are striking parallels—and similar rhythms—between what goes on at the Duke Youth Academy for Christian Formation each summer and what happens daily at St. Joseph’s Home for Boys in Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

In both places, participants start the day early with prayer and praise, share meals as a family, and worship God in many ways, incorporating music, art, study, and community service.

That’s why, when Duke Divinity Chaplain Sally Bates talked to Bill Nathan, 24, and Walnes Cangas, 22, about coming from St. Joseph’s to the summer 2008 Duke Youth Academy (DYA), they were a bit puzzled. Both young men had enjoyed various youth events in the States in recent years, says Bates, who became unofficial god-

mother to the 20 or so young boys at St. Joseph’s after having led teams of Divinity School student and faculty volunteers to work at the home during the past six spring breaks.

“They were, of course, excited and had lots of questions, but they didn’t seem to quite grasp the significance of the experience they would have here,

since basically, this is the way they live all the time,” Bates says. “But I thought it was a perfect experience for their ages and situations.”

Bates, who describes Nathan and Cangas as “beacons of hope,” says she’d observed over the years the ways in which they serve their “family” of orphans and other homeless boys

Top left: Bill Nathan and Walnes Cangas, who lead the St. Joseph Home for Boys in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. *Bottom left:* Nathan, a gifted drummer, performing last summer at the Duke Youth Academy for Christian Formation. He and Walnes Cangas were the first international participants.



Divinity Chaplain Sally Bates, who has become the unofficial godmother for the children at the St. Joseph Home for Boys in Port-au-Prince, calls Director Bill Nathan and Assistant Director Walnes Cangas “beacons of hope.”

from their native Haiti, the Western Hemisphere’s poorest country.

“It’s amazing to watch Bill work: He supervises the business, and is in charge of discipline and education for the boys. He’s an artist—a very talented drummer. Plus, he goes to school and leads worship services and helps his neighbors,” she says. “Even though he’s only 24, he really is a competent administrator. And he is actually a parent to the boys there, who have the normal complicated adolescent problems.”

When DYA Director Fred Edie heard about the young leaders at St. Joseph’s, which was established in 1985 by Michael Geilenfeld, a Catholic missionary who once worked with Mother Teresa, he could see how they would benefit.

“We thought that the Youth Academy’s similarly patterned community might provide Bill and Walnes with opportunities for extended reflection upon their ministry with children in Haiti,” he says. “Of course, we also knew that their stories and witness would challenge and inspire our students and that their gifts for music and dance would enliven our communal life.”

Bill is now the director of St. Joseph’s, where he was given refuge as a 10-year-old after an American nun learned of his plight. He and his older sister had been separated after their mother’s death and each taken in by neighbors. The story of Bill’s three years of confinement as a *restavék*, a Kreyol euphemism for child slave which translates as “stays with,” is included in Ben Skinner’s book on international child

abuse, *A Crime So Monstrous: Face to Face with Modern Day Slavery* (Free Press, 2008).

Neither Nathan nor Cangas, his assistant and co-director of the St. Joseph Community Arts Center and the Resurrection Dance Theatre of Haiti, knew what to expect when they arrived to live with peers from across the United States in the Youth Academy’s intentional Christian community.

But within a few days they were immersed in the community’s monastic structure, praising the other participants, the Duke faculty who lead the daily plenary sessions, the beauty of the campus, and even the quality of the food. They were already speaking of aspects of DYA that they would implement back home.

Because of his leadership experience, Nathan was named a DYA Fellow, and Cangas, a talented dancer who is academically gifted, was invited as a student participant. While at Duke, they performed their music and drumming for their peers and even volunteered, along with other DYA participants, at a fund-raising carnival to benefit a Durham center for disadvantaged children. On the final Sunday of DYA, Nathan served communion at Duke Chapel, where he was amazed by the large number of people in attendance.

Undaunted by the intense pace of the DYA schedule (or the policy banning electronic devices), Nathan and Cangas admitted that the discussions and plenary sessions exposed them to the most challenging and rigorous theological discussions of their lives.

Nathan enjoyed his involvement with the other five Fellows in his small group. “It’s amazing—there are people from many different religious backgrounds. ... One of my group is a youth director at a church; he tells us how he works with kids and how he tries to motivate them. I’m really learning from him and the others about how to work with our boys at home. I want to instill in our boys the kind of pride and hope I see here.”

Another favorite time for Nathan has been morning Bible study. “I understand more about the Bible, and how the Old and New Testaments are connected. I really loved it.”

Cangas, whom Bates calls a “contagiously joyful person,” says he learned “a lot about Jesus and how he wants us to live our lives and be better Christians” in the daily plenary sessions. He’s also intrigued by the fact that during open discussions, “everyone”—even the youngest student at DYA—“has something to say” and isn’t shy about jumping in to say it.

In the end, despite the differences in setting, the most important similarity between DYA and St. Joseph’s, the young men agreed, is that both “are places of God.” And now, they have family both in Haiti and across the United States.

“This was the perfect place for me,” Cangas says with a grin. ■

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