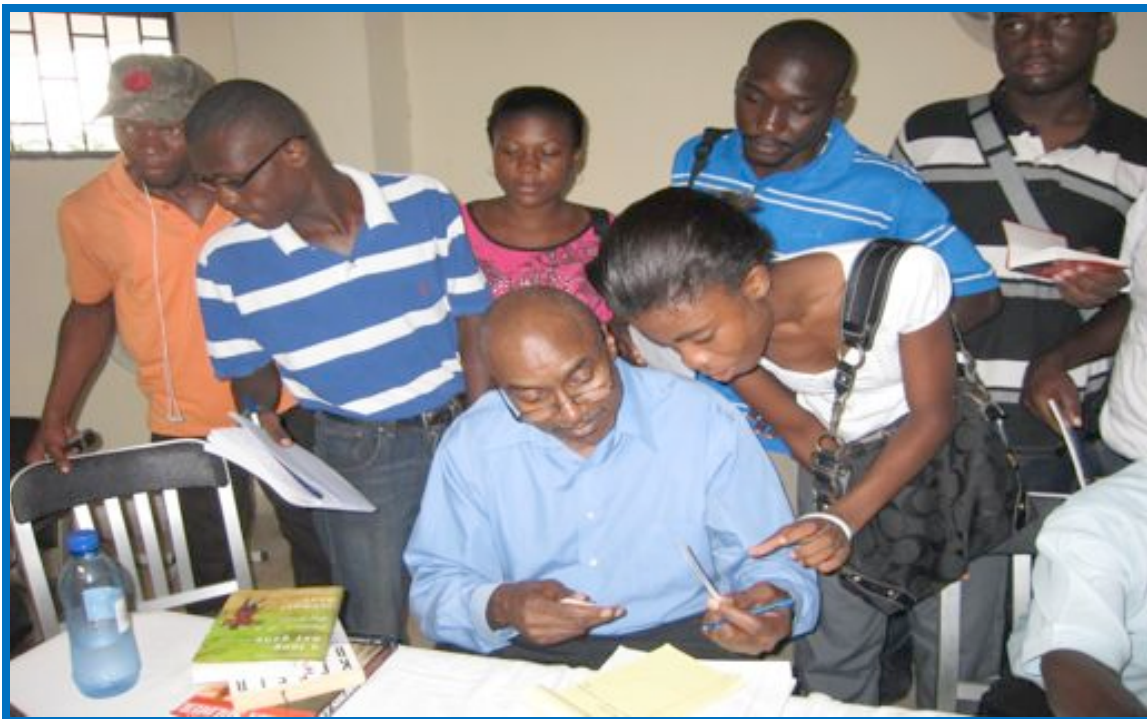


# ALIVE & FREE



# HAITI

Dr. Joseph E. Marshall Jr, Executive Director, Omega Boys Club

*In the fall of 2011, the State Department came calling again. I was going on another trip to another country. This time it was going to be Haiti—to lecture on “Youth Empowerment.” From the looks of it, it was going to be a whirlwind tour—five speaking engagements in four days—one at a cultural center, one at the American University of the Caribbean, one at the Haitian American Institute, and even one at a juvenile rehabilitation center.*



Haiti. Wow. I was excited as hell. If there was one place that I would have picked myself to go, Haiti would have been it. All I could think about was the recent earthquake there and how it had almost destroyed the country. Like millions of others, I had followed the story and seen pictures of the devastation. We’d even done stories on the whole thing on Street Soldiers. Now I was going to see the country first hand, to see things for myself. I wondered, “How were things now more two years later; how were the people holding up; how much repair has actually been done?” Now, I’d get the chance to go and see things for myself.

I knew that Haiti was the only black nation in the Western Hemisphere and that under the leadership of Toussaint L’Overture, Jean Jacques Dessalines, and Henri Christophe, the country had defeated the French and freed itself of colonialism in the late 1700’s. I also knew that Haiti was the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere. But that was about it. Wanting and needing to know more, I read the info in the packet sent to me and then watched the Henry Louis Gates PBS series *Black in Latin America*. Here’s what else I learned:

*Haiti is the oldest black republic in the world and the second oldest republic in the Western hemisphere after the United States, who also happens to be Haiti’s largest trading partner. About one of every eight Haitians lives abroad, with more that 80% of Haitians with college degrees emigrating primarily to Canada.*

*More than 770,000 African slaves were shipped to Haiti—300,000 more were shipped to the U.S. At one time Haiti was the richest colony in the new World—the jewel in France’s crown, known as the “Pearl of the Antilles.” Its sugar plantations produced half of the world’s sugar.*

*The slave rebellion made Haiti a free nation, but at a cost that destroyed the economy. Ever fearful of the return of the French, the new Haitian government destroyed anything connected to slavery and colonialism—the sugar plantations, the roads—everything.*

*Due to trade embargoes, blockades, reparations paid to France of over \$1,000,000,000 for recognition of Haitian sovereignty, and the denial of the Haitian people to govern themselves through American occupation, the once prosperous economy soon became the poorest. Throw in the ruthless dictatorships of Francis ‘Papa Doc’ Duvalier and his son “Baby Doc”, both of whom stole millions of dollars in foreign*

*aid, and the ensuing political instability of the last thirty years—well, we have Haiti today. The last thing the country needed was an earthquake, a catastrophe which killed an estimated 230,000 people and left another one and a half million homeless.*

When I talked to my contact in Washington, they told me there would be a little twist to this latest trip. Yes, I would be speaking about Omega Boys Club and *Alive & Free* and Street Soldiers, but I would also be talking with the young people about a book they read—*A Long Way Gone* by Ishmael Beah, the best seller about a boy soldier in Sierra Leone. The Embassy had distributed copies of the book to a number of the youth I would be talking to. I hadn't read it myself, so I had to get a copy and read it too.

When I received my itinerary from Washington, there were a couple of things on it that made me go 'uh oh'. It read:

*We are in the midst of hurricane season. We recommend coming with rain gear (umbrellas, rain coats, shoes, etc...). It's also hot and humid, which means lots of mosquitoes. Insect repellent and anti-itch cream will come in handy.*

*The roads in Haiti are rather bumpy. If you get car sick easily, please bring medication.*

*Traditionally, things begin very early in Haiti. Haitians are up and heading to work by 5:30am. Although our programs will not begin this early, please be prepared for early mornings during this visit.*

5:30 in the morning! Ah, you've got to be kidding. Hurricanes, mosquitoes—well, uh.....ok. But

getting up at 5:30am—oh hell no. 🙄 If that's the deal, then I'm going to bed early, early, early. There will be no late nights for me on this trip.

Haiti here I come.



## **DAY 1**

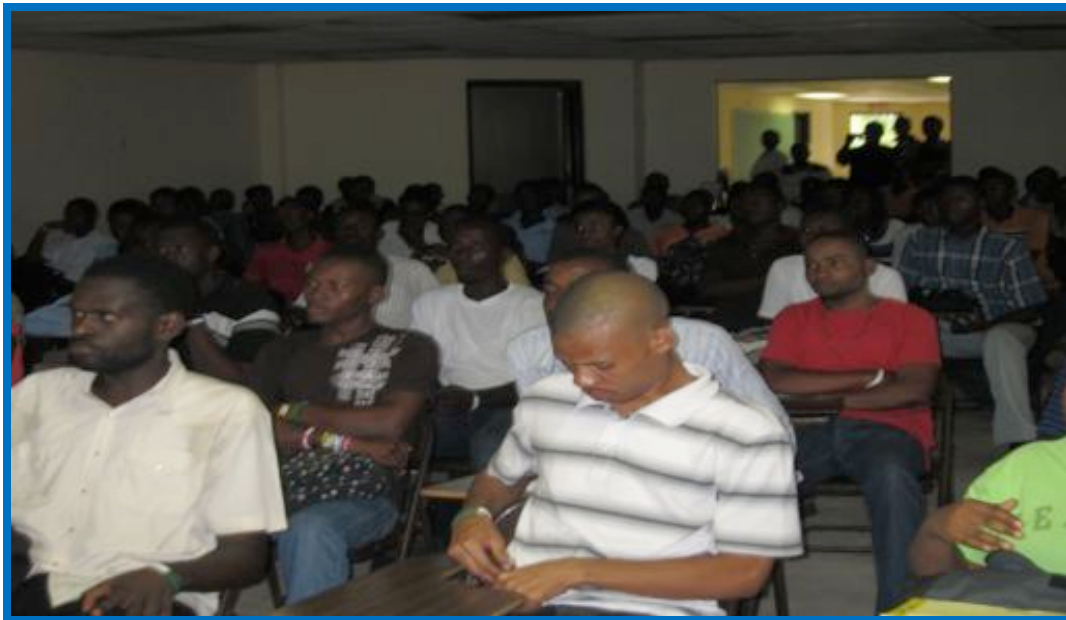
The plane trip over was not that bad - a red eye to Miami and then an hour and half flight to Port-au-Prince. I got there about 8am in the morning. The folks from the Embassy picked me up and we headed straight to a meeting there. My first glimpse of the city told me a lot. First of all, let me tell you, Haiti is a black country--and I do mean black. The people are black. Everyone I saw was as dark or darker than me. It was like I was in Africa, only in the Western hemisphere. The streets were jam packed with people. Everyone was getting their hustle on, hawking goods, pushing carts, selling anything and everything. Women (and men) walked about with baskets of goods on their heads. Traffic was gridlocked--and the roads were very, very poor. The scene was a mass of cars, motorcycles and people—all on the move. Oh and it was hot too—just like in the Motherland.

The damage that the city had suffered from the quake was evident right away. I remembered then that Port-au-Prince had been hit the hardest. Rubble was everywhere. It looked like the quake had happened yesterday, and although I'm sure they've done a lot of cleaning up, there's still a lot to be done. Traffic was really, really slow. Someone told me later that Haitians rise so early because traffic conditions are so bad that you've got to get an early start if you want any chance of getting to work on time. The other reason is that a lot of homes don't have electricity.....and the sunlight is the light, so that means it's time to get up.

My contact at the Embassy was Regine Rene, a young sister from New Orleans who is the 'Attachee aux Affaires Culturelles for the Bureau des Affaires Publiques—the Cultural Attache for the Bureau of Public Affairs. Regine has a bachelor's degree from Loyola University of New Orleans and a Master's Degree in Intercultural Affairs from American University. She's actually Haitian herself; her parents, both medical doctors, moved to the states where she was born and raised. Turned out that everything I didn't know about Haiti, Regine did. She had set up a pretty daunting schedule for me—speaking engagements from one end of the island to the other. So after a meeting with her and the ambassador it was time to get started.



My first presentation was at FOKAL, which she described as an organization that was a leading supporter of youth education, community, arts and culture. The audience was about 130 high school and university students. Right away I found out what my main challenge was going to be.



I'm used to speaking directly to my audience and of course having them speak directly back to me. Up to now I'd been lucky—in Nigeria, and South Africa and Canada, everyone spoke English. No such luck here. Very few spoke English. They spoke French and Creole. I would have to speak through an interpreter, which meant things were going to take twice as long to do.

My interpreter's name was Françoise Pean. She told me not to worry; she had done translation for the Embassy many times. She used to be a teacher herself and was as interested in the youth as I was. She told me later that I was easy to interpret because I was direct and concise and passionate—all at the same time. After a couple of times of us doing it together, she almost knew what I was going to say—and she said it with the same conviction. I'm convinced we didn't lose a thing in the translation.

I always want to know something about my audience before I get too far into my remarks—what's on their minds, what do they think, what's going on in their heads. So after a quick introduction, I asked them a question about the key issues and challenges that they felt that youth in Haiti faced. Here is what they told me:

- People don't care about the youth. The parents don't care and the government doesn't care.
  - The youth need someone to talk to.
  - The youth are victims of a political system.
  - The educational system is very poor.
    - Gangs.
  - The educated people leave the country.
    - A lack of role models.
    - Teen pregnancy.
    - Increasing violence.
    - Young people with guns.
  - Sexually exploited minors; sex trafficking.
- The presence of foreigners in the country (I was hoping they didn't mean me).
- The irresponsibility of the youth. Many youth do not take responsibility for their own destiny.

After listening to them, I told them all about Omega and that many youth in the United States expressed similar feelings and faced similar issues. I showed the latest Omega video, which Françoise interpreted for them. The whole thing turned out to be a pretty lively exchange between us, especially during the question and answer period. I later found out that many in this group were on the debate team at their school and loved to engage in point/counterpoint. (They had actually seen the movie *The Great Debaters*). In the end I pointed out to them that whatever problems the country had, that they would have to be part of the solution. They, as the educated ones, would have to be the ones to tackle those problems head on. I gave them the Omega Rule for Change—*If You Want Things to Change, Change begins with You*—and they nodded in agreement. “Merci beaucoup,” Dr. Marshall, many of them said. “Thank you for coming to talk to us.” *Merci*

I later found out just how special this group was. They were the educated elite—the fortunate ones. Régine told me illiteracy was a huge problem in Haiti. Over 60% of the population can't read or write, and another 20% is functionally literate—barely able to read and write. She also said over 60% of the population is under the age of 25. Wow. That's a whole lot of young folks.

Driving back to the hotel, I saw so many young people out on the street. I mean nobody was in school. From ages 6 to 22—they were on the block, hustlin', selling, chillin', kickin' it. And I don't mean that in a bad way. It's just that they weren't in school, partially because schools cost so much and partially because there aren't enough schools for them to go to anyway. It's sad.

There's a lot of work that has to be done here—and it begins with education.

The hotel I'm staying at is called the Karibe. It's gorgeous, just gorgeous. I was told that former President Clinton stayed here on his visit. I can see why. The room was great, the service was wonderful and the food was delicious—I had rack of lamb my first night—but it's the setting that makes it so nice. There were trees and foliage everywhere. Just the place to rest up and get ready for Day Two. I'm tired. I'm going to sleep.



## **DAY 2**

The alarm woke me up at 5:30am, but thank God they let me sleep in a little bit. Regine wasn't picking me up until 8:30, so I had some time. Today we've got two presentations and the first one is at a juvenile hall, something I'm used to doing back home. I'm pretty sure my message will be the same—stay *Alive & Free*.

The Juvenile Re-education Center is the only institution of this kind in Haiti. It currently houses 126 males ages 13-20 who are there for just about everything—murder, rape, robbery—you name it. The Narcotics Section at the Embassy works closely with the Haitian National Police to maintain the center and the UN also has a strong presence there. When I walked in, I saw a group of young boys lying on the floor in a holding cell—a very small holding cell. Looked like they had been there a while and it looked like they were going to be there a while.



The room I spoke to the kids in was small and hot and humid and funky—and I'm sure all 126 boys were in there. We set up the microphones and the computer to show the videos, but the power—and the fans-- kept going out. Francoise—my translator—and I kept it moving though.



The guys were a great audience. I asked them how many of them wanted to stay *Alive & Free* and every hand shot up. Those who were in there for the first time swore that it would be the last, and they listened attentively as I told the story of Omega Boys Club member Michael Gibson and how he had gone from the jailhouse to the schoolhouse—from the California Youth Authority to Morehouse College. They loved Mike's story, and when they got to actually see him in the CBS Evening News video that I showed them next, they knew I wasn't making the whole thing up. Many asked if he could come and speak to them someday.

On my way to my next presentation, I got to see more of the earthquake's devastation. Francoise had the Embassy driver take us by the President's palace and the offices of the cabinet ministers. What I saw looked like the remnants of the Roman Coliseum after it had been pillaged and ransacked by the invaders. The buildings were in ruins, like sand castles at a beach that the tide had come in and swept away. They were just crumpled. Only the bottom halves remained—and it looked to me like nothing had been cleaned up. Imagine the White House and Capitol Building—the twin symbols of American government—completely destroyed and two years later still looking the same as the day it happened.

Ouch!

My second engagement was at the Haitian American Institute speaking to university students and adults. The Institute is a bi-national center founded in 1942 to reinforce friendship and cultural ties between the two countries. The room was packed—nearly 400 hundred people. Again I followed the same common theme—"What's going on with the youth in Haiti?" One by one they took the microphone and told me. (Note: One thing I find in young people everywhere, they always say no one listens to them, but when you give them a chance to speak, they just sit there and say nothing. I always admire the brave souls who are willing to get up in front of their peers and speak). Again I listened intently to what they had to say and then I told them about Omega Boys Club and Street Soldiers. The video clips of the Club and the radio show really helped. Through the interpreter they heard from

Kareem and Evangela and Mike and Latisha and Rashad and Nzinga and Latu and Carlos.....and a whole lot of talk about their struggle to stay *Alive & Free*.

The hit of the session was the balloon - the full balloon full of anger, fear and pain, the emotional residue that all of us carry that we keep inside and don't talk about. I blew one up and tied it tight. I told them that at Omega we talk about the stuff in the balloon and we let it out so that the balloon doesn't burst. They really liked that. "Whoa," they said. "We've got stuff in our balloons and we need to let it out too. I wish we had a group like that here."



The presentation was scheduled for two hours. It lasted over three. If the Embassy hadn't said it's time to go, we might still be there.

Back at the hotel, I realized that today was Tuesday and that meant that the light was on at Omega tonight. I've said it before and I'll say it again--there's nothing like Tuesday night at the Omega Boys Club. I emailed Kareem and Dre and Ms. Estell and told them to let the kids know where I was and to tell them how much Omega means to young people everywhere.

*~ We're not all related, but we're definitely all family.~*

### **DAY 3**

I awoke this morning to a BIG problem. Our plans for day three were in turmoil. It seemed that the proper paperwork for our trip had not been processed yet. We didn't have the drivers needed for our drive to the provinces where today's speaking engagements were to be held. Because traffic was so crazy, we had planned to be out the door and on the road by 6:30am. It was already 8am and we still didn't have a clue as to when we'd leave. Regine was frantic.

The provinces were at the other end of the island about 150 miles away. The presentation this afternoon was going to be in the city of Les Cayes at the American University of the Caribbean, a non-denominational Christian-centered university. We were scheduled to be there at 1:00pm. We've still got plenty of time, Regine told me, if we could get everything ironed out.

Finally about 10am we got the green light from the Embassy and Regine said, let's go. We sprang into **'hurry up'** mode and got out on the road and off we went to well.....nowhere. We had waited too long and now traffic was at a standstill. We couldn't even get out of the city! Oh no!



Slowly, agonizingly we plodded along until finally at last we were out of Port-au-Prince.

**And then the real adventure began.** That's when I really understood this speaker program travel tip:

***The roads in Haiti are rather bumpy. If you get car sick easily, please bring medication.***

Did they say rather bumpy? That was an understatement. Hey, I don't like roller coasters. I never go on them at amusement parks. I just don't like being all shaken up. Well I got a three hour roller coaster ride

today. "Shake it like a salt shaker baby." Man, that was some ride.



Half the time I felt like my stomach was in my mouth.

The scenery was wonderful though. There were trees, trees and more trees. I caught a glimpse of a couple of beaches and they were beautiful. The water was **soooo** blue. I'd never seen water that blue before. (We couldn't stop because, hell-we were late). And then out of nowhere a marketplace would appear--full of folks selling their wares. The road would narrow because the streets were full of people. We had to honk our way through and then we were off again.

We finally arrived about 2pm and the students were still waiting. The place was filled. I met my new interpreter Diogene Altema. I hoped he would capture me as well as my first one did. We quickly settled in and the program began. Once again here came my questions. "Tell me about the youth in Haiti—what are the problems that you face?"



I loved hearing their answers. Many were similar to what I heard before.

1. We can't afford to go the university. Lack of funds. Too expensive.
2. There is a lack of trust in the young.
3. Financial hardships in the house. Parents can't afford to feed their children.
4. The economy is weak.
5. Peer pressure
6. Gangs
7. Violence—fear of being robbed
8. Only so many slots open at the university. Competition is fierce. Many are left out.
9. Leaving the house is unsafe. Going back and forth to school is dangerous.

They were really eager to hear about young people in the United States and especially eager to hear about what I did. Once again the magic of Omega came through. All I had to do was tell the story—how I founded Omega, why I did it, how long we've lasted and how successful we've been. I told them that believe it or not, many young people in the United States faced similar problems and overcome them. And then I showed the videos and....bam—there was the proof.

Diogene's translation was really good. When I put emphasis on something, so did he. When I was demonstrative, so was he.

We were like mirror images of each other.



It was really a fun presentation.

When the students discovered I had written *Street Soldier*, a number of them said they'd like to read it. One big problem--it was written in English and not in French. Regine told them maybe she could get it translated and then she'd get copies to them. (Now that would be really cool). I also told them I'd learn

to speak either French or Creole. They just looked at me and laughed. “Good luck,” I knew they were thinking.

Back in the car, our long day was finally over. We were driving to our hotel for the night when ANOTHER problem surfaced. Regine screamed out. “Oh no,” she said, “our flight back to Port-au-Prince on Friday has been canceled. All our plans have to be changed.” What that meant was that my one day of relaxation was out; the sight-seeing tour after my last speaking engagement on Thursday wasn’t going to happen. What it also meant that we were going to have to *drive* back to Port-au-Prince. Oh no, not

the roller coaster again! Shake it like a salt shaker baby. 🍷 🍷

#### DAY 4

I was up early in the morning for breakfast for the last presentation of the trip. We spent the night at a place called Dan’s Creek, a little resort right outside of Les Cayes. It’s located on the beach and the setting is just spectacular. Regine had actually gotten up early and gone swimming. I was too out of it to do anything but sleep, but I did manage to at least get a few pictures.



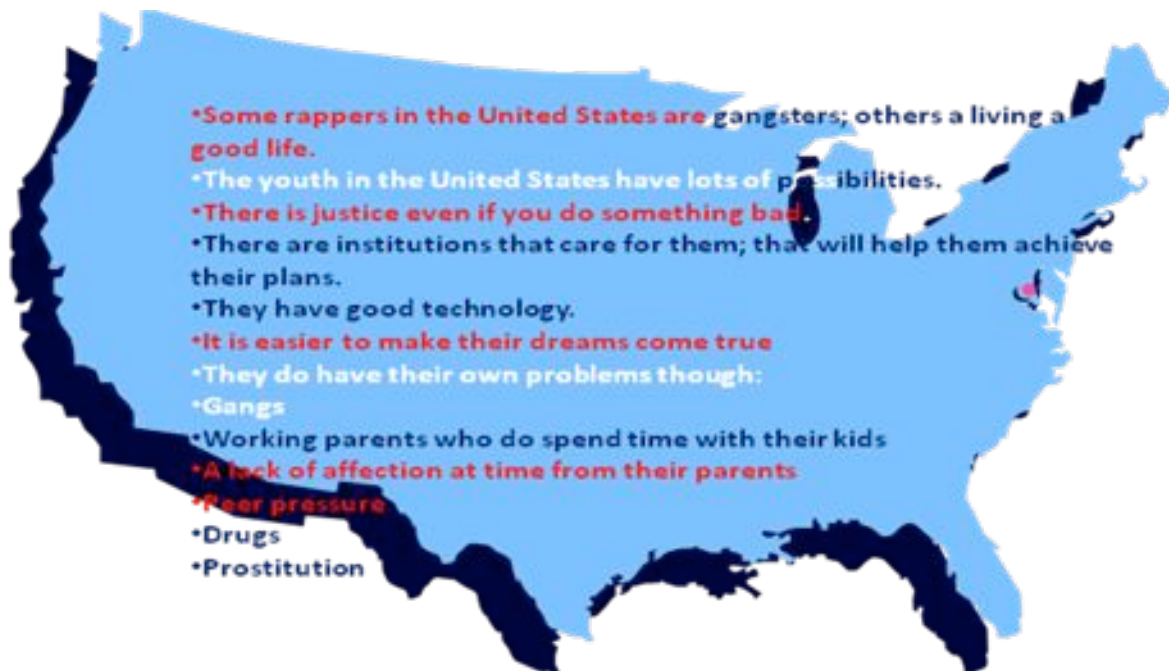
I made another discovery though, this one not nearly as pleasant. The mosquitoes had gotten me! 🦟

🦟 I don’t know how; 🦟 I hadn’t seen any 🦟 buzzing about, but man—had they gotten me. 🦟 I was itching everywhere. 🦟 Where the hell was that anti-itch medicine? 🦟 I guess it served me right, 🦟 because I had left the mosquito repellent 🦟 I bought back home in San Francisco.

Our last presentation was to high school aged youth at the Salle St. Louis in Les Cayes, the only cultural center there. The building wasn’t in very good shape at all. We had to walk around mud and water (and more mosquitoes) to get inside, and when we got inside—well let’s just say inside wasn’t too much better than outside 🙄. We got the microphones to work but we couldn’t get the videos hooked up—no LCD projector was in the house. Plus there weren’t even a lot of kids there and that really disappointed Regine because supposedly extensive radio and TV advertising had been done. I knew I was just going to have to make this one happen. I turned to my interpreter and said “let’s go get ‘em.”

At Omega we have big crowds just about all the time, but some of our best meetings are the small ones. I don't know what it is; it just seems to happen that way. Maybe it's the intimacy of the group or.....hell I don't know what it is, but -- those meetings are just powerful. And this turned out to be one of those. It wasn't a presentation or a speaking engagement—it was an Omega meeting. And while more kids eventually showed up, the meeting stayed the same all the way through.

I started this one off a little differently. Instead of asking them about the problems of Haitian youth, I asked them about their impressions of youth in America. Here are their responses:



It was fascinating listening to them. One young man said that he wanted to come to the United States because of all the possibilities. He said that if he was in the U.S., he was sure that he would make it.

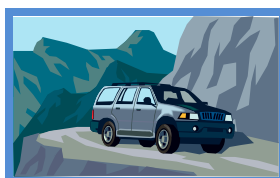


Their impressions were so real to them; their answers were so from the heart that I had to respond in kind. How could I make them see that for a lot of young people in America, things just weren't working out? How could I make them understand that what looks like a lot to one, looks like too little to another; that opportunity and good intention is not enough; that folks get caught up all the time, willing to risk their life and freedom for the quick fix, the fast money, the fast life. They're so obsessed about what they think somebody else has, that they don't realize what they have themselves. That many of them don't realize their own value. That in trying to be somebody, they end up nobody. What does it say in the Bible--"What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul?" In America, despite all the seeming advantages, a lot of young people are losing their lives.....and their souls.

That's why I can't say enough about the young people of Omega. That's why I give them all the credit. "Don't believe the hype," said Public Enemy--but first you gotta *recognize* the hype. **Almost everything around young people is hype and the Omegas actually see through it.** It's their willingness to do that, that blows everybody's minds and it blew the minds of these young people thousands of miles away in Haiti. Watching the videos of the Omegas "daring to be different" made them want to do the same. One by one they came to the mic and shared their own stories too—their hopes, their dreams, their aspirations. It was all just great. It was Omega in Haiti! We took a group picture and then as much as I didn't want to, I had to tell them goodbye.



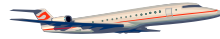
It was time to hit the road.





The ride back to Port-au-Prince didn't seem that bad that this time. Oh, it was a roller coaster again but it didn't seem to bother me that much. It could have been that I was getting used to it, but I think it was the satisfaction of meeting and talking to the kids. I had such a great time with them. We only stopped once on our way back because Regine wanted to get me a Haitian confection called *douce marcosse*. It was good. When we finally got back to the city it was raining heavily and folks were scurrying to get home. It was a whole lot of people and very few public buses. I guess they all made it.

## DAY 5



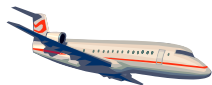
It's my last morning in Haiti. I'm catching a flight back to Miami this afternoon. This week has gone by so fast. Indeed it had—with twists and turns every step of the way. But we had pulled it off and made it happen, and brought a great message to a lot of young people. I felt good about that. We had spread the word of Omega and delivered the message of Street Soldiers. We had given the young people in Haiti a taste of *Alive & Free*, but I knew they wanted more and I wanted to give them more. The work had really just begun. I thought about all of the things I had pledged to do—do a Street Soldiers radio show on the trip here, get the book *Street Soldier* translated into French and distributed to the students, talk to the Embassy about getting some of the adult leaders to come to the United States to take the *Alive & Free* Training Institute, plan my next trip here—and resolved to make sure that all these things get done. *Alive & Free* Haiti had begun—but there was so much more to do.

Diane came by in the Embassy car and picked me up. I checked out of the hotel and we wound our way to the airport. "Thanks for everything," she said. "See you on the radio," I said. One last hug and I was off through security to my boarding gate.

*Au revoir, Haiti. Thanks for listening to me. See you next time and please Stay Alive & Free.*

## EPILOGUE

Since I've been back home, Haiti has been buzzing through my mind. The sights, the sounds, the kids—the whole experience. I couldn't wait to do the radio show, but because of scheduling challenges, it didn't happen until three weeks after I got back. The show turned out great. Diogene my translator was one of the guests and he was sensational. The other guest was Myriam Cenatus, who was present for the presentation at the Haitian American Institute. It was great to hear them talk about the students' reactions to what I had to say. One of the youth told Diogene that "Dr. Marshall is a great man for what he is doing." That was very nice to hear. A lot of folks told me how much they liked the show, especially hearing from the Haitians themselves. Thanks Diogene, thanks Myriam. I'll be back at you soon. Count on it.





**Dr. Joseph E. Marshall Jr.**

**Omega Boys Club**

***AFTER THE RADIO SHOW, I RECEIVED THIS EMAIL FROM DIOGENE . . .***

**Sent: Thursday, October 20, 2011 10:15 AM**  
**To: Marshall, Joseph**  
**Subject: Re: THANK YOU! THANK YOU! THANK YOU!**

***To God be The Glory!***

***Dr. Joseph E. Marshall, Jr.***

***I am also thankful to you, who have given me an opportunity to be the voice of the Haitian youth. Only Lord knows how much I've been longing to find a place or someone who would not only listen to us and our challenges, but who would hear us and care for us...just wanna tell you you're The Man! we've longed for.***

***I am so inspired by you, your presentation and everything, I've started to read your book, but what I really want is to be enrolled and embark with you guys in this mission which I found "Pure and Faultless".***

***I am ready to risk it all to join you specially to be trained and come back to train all the youths in my community.***

***Praying God to make a way for me to see my dream come true; truly after I met you I realize that I need to be more than a translator for the sake of my brothers looking for a solution in drugs, alcohol, rape and sex; for the sake of all these children called "Throwaway" who are dying today of starvation or a preventable disease. For the sake of more than a million people who have yet hear the Gospel of Christ our Lord and an increasingly marginalized and relatively ineffective church in my community and particularly for the sake of my life, my family and the people who surround me, I want to risk it all in Jesus' Name.***

***Love you all "Street Soldiers, and one love to you all at "Omega Boys Club" longing to meet you all.***

***In Christ!***

***Diogene Jean Samuel Altema.***



**AMEN! AMEN!! AMEN!!!**