



## Seeing Haiti with My Own Eyes



**By David Braughton** - The children started filling the large cafeteria 90 minutes before lunch. They came, two, four, nine at a time and squeezed quietly 10 to 12 onto row after row of wooden benches. By the time the food was ready, over 600 kids, and the occasional mother cradling an infant, packed the room. Late arrivals were directed outside to large concrete steps where they sat unshaded beneath the afternoon sun or stood in line hoping that there would be enough food to go around.

Before the meal, adults led the kids in songs and repeated in unison, “piti piti na rive!” The old Creole saying is a testament of hope and means “Little by little, we will arrive!” Then the other volunteers and I were instructed to form four long lines stretching from where the plates were prepared down the aisles and, like a fire brigade, started passing steaming plates of red beans and rice and a small chicken drumstick to each other and then along to the waiting youngsters.

For many of the children this would be their first and only meal of the day – even though it was 2:30 p.m. I was struck by how kind they were. No one grabbed for a plate and all willingly passed the food on to the child sitting next to them before taking a plate for themselves. Most, even those four or five years old, had an even younger child with them, who they made sure was taken care of before helping themselves.



One lanky boy dressed in blue jeans and a faded t-shirt, upon seeing my name tag, beamed and called out to me, “Mwen rele David!” (My name is David too!) I joked with him and his friends, then spied a toddler staring up at me with large round eyes. I made faces and talked in a funny voice to see if I could make her smile. But she shyly drew back instead, watching my every move.

I was in Haiti to observe the work of our Buddhist Global Relief partner, the What If Foundation and its Haitian counterpart, Na Rive. The last time I had been in the country was 1988 after the fall of Baby Doc, Jean-Claude Duvalier. I had spent nearly two weeks traveling the country, visiting orphanages and witnessing first-hand the human toll of colonialism, dictatorship, and oppression. I had hoped that I might see progress since my time there nearly 30 years ago, but I did not. As a result of continued political unrest, lack of natural resources, absence of basic infrastructure, social, political, and economic inequality, a devastating earthquake in 2010, and callous disregard by the U.S. and other developed countries, Haiti is worse off today than ever before.



Poverty, for the average Haitian, is their life. The gross per capita income is \$1710. But with 26% of the wealth held by the richest 2% of the population, 77% of Haitians survive on less than \$2 a day and 54% on less than \$1 a day, with children suffering the most.

According to the World Bank 73% of Haitian children 6–24 months are anemic; 30% under the age of five are stunted, 19% are underweight, and 10% are wasted; 25% of infants are born with a low birth weight; and 68% of children aged 6–24 months are not fed according to recommended infant and young child feeding practices. While nearly 88% of Haitian children attend some form of elementary school, fewer than 20% will enroll in a secondary school and only about 2% will receive any post-secondary education. Given that the average time spent in school is 4.9 years, it comes as no surprise that Haiti has the lowest literacy rate in the Western Hemisphere with fewer than 62% of Haitians able to read or write as compared to 87% in Jamaica or Cuba and 99% in the Dominican Republic



The Lamanjay Food Program and Father Jeri School, which I visited, are located in the Ti Plaz Kazo neighborhood of Port-au-Prince, a jungle of flimsy tin shacks built back to back and covered with blue USAID tarps, reminders of the 2010 earthquake. The community is a 30-minute drive from the airport along crowded, litter-strewn streets, brightly painted buildings, and hundreds of sidewalk stands, where residents eke out a living buying and selling their meager wares.



The Lamanjay Food Program feeds over 1000 children, five days a week, and Father Jeri School will house upwards to 400 children by running two shifts a day. Both were the dream of the late Father Gerard Jean-Juste, an outspoken advocate for Haitian refugees abroad and the poor of his country. The food program was established in 2000 through the efforts of Margaret Trost, founder of the What If Foundation. But it has taken over 16 years for Margaret and her foundation, with the help of Buddhist Global Relief and other donors, to finish the school.



Returning to Haiti was a disheartening reminder that poverty is a plague born out of fear, ignorance, and greed. It infects everyone it touches, including those who perpetuate it. Built on slavery and human exploitation, Haiti was once the richest and most productive colony of the French empire. With the slave revolt of 1791, Haiti became the Caribbean's first independent nation, but was forced to pay what would in today's dollars amount to billions in reparations to France. For its first 60 years, the U.S. refused to recognize Haiti out of fear that the Haitian revolt might spread to the slaves at home and European nations refused to trade with it. In the early 20th century, the U.S. invaded Haiti, trained its military, and then left, opening the door for Duvalier and decades more of exploitation and oppression. International aid has often lined the pockets of the ruling elite and done little to benefit Haitian citizens.

And when Jean-Bertrand Aristide was democratically elected president in 1990, the U.S. conspired to have him overthrown.



There are no simple solutions to Haiti's myriad of challenges. But compassion isn't interested in simple solutions. Compassion demands that we take action and do what good we can, no matter how overwhelming the circumstances. When we started BGR several years back, we were inspired by the dream of engaging people from around the globe to help in easing the suffering of children, women, and men who seldom have enough to eat. We know that hunger is a scourge on humankind, not because we don't have the resources to ensure that everyone gets enough to eat, but because we lack the political will to end this plague. The involvement of Buddhist Global Relief in feeding and educating young children is an affirmation that you and I can make a difference and that our dream can become a reality.



After the food ran out, I watched the throngs of children exit through a small opening in the steel gate that sequestered the Father Jeri School from the surrounding neighborhood. Some were running and jumping or playing games and laughing as all children do, and I wondered where they were going and what the future held for them. Would this small island of good in the midst of such dire poverty really make a difference?



My thoughts were interrupted by the tentative touch of a small hand encircling my little finger. When I looked down, I saw the little girl I had tried to make smile earlier staring up at me with those two stunning eyes. I picked her up and she gave me a hug and smiled. Then she wiggled out of my arms, took her sister's hand, and walked away. As she did, she stopped and turned and waved as if to reassure me that the good we do, no matter how insignificant it might seem, when born out of compassion, does make a difference and always will. Piti piti, na rive!

*David Braughton is Treasurer of BGR.*

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## Projects for the Year Ahead

**By BGR Staff** - On Saturday, April 23, BGR team members held their annual general meeting, followed the next day by a board meeting to select projects for our next fiscal year, which runs from July 1, 2016 through June 30, 2017. Both meetings took place in the Woo Ju Memorial Library at Chuang Yen Monastery in Carmel, New York. Team members came from across the U.S., including California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Maryland, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Washington State.



This year, at the Saturday meeting, we were honored by the presence of Ayya Yeshe, the Australian nun who founded and directs the Bodhicitta Foundation in India, a long-term BGR partner. Ayya Yeshe, who arrived from India just a few days before the meeting, gave a deeply moving presentation on her work in Maharashtra with girls and women of the Dalit community, the former “untouchables” or “outcasts,” leading them in their endeavors to emerge from poverty and social exclusion and rediscover their innate dignity and potentials for high achievement. She poignantly reminded us that the statistics that testify to the success of BGR’s work are not mere numbers but represent real human lives, people who have been touched and transformed by our support for her projects and those of our other partners.

At the board meeting on April 24, the BGR board approved 27 projects for partnership grants in the next fiscal year, at a total outlay of about \$580,000, a big jump over last year’s \$375,000. Several projects are renewals of annual projects, while others are new projects with established partners and new partnerships, including one in Nicaragua and another in Peru, our first in Latin America.

This year our capacity was bolstered by an extremely generous offer from the Chao Foundation to provide BGR with grants of \$100,000 per year over a three-year period to support several multi-year projects. The three projects we agreed to sponsor are:

- a partnership with the Helen Keller Foundation to improve health services and access to nutritious food and supplements for mothers and young children in Kenya

- a partnership with Moanoghar to construct a permanent residential facility for boy students at their school in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh (the girl students already have a secure residential facility)
- a partnership with the What If Foundation to fully equip a new school for extremely poor children in Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

We are deeply grateful to the Chao Foundation for this grant, an extraordinary expression of compassion and trust in the mission of BGR.

Brief descriptions of the projects can be found in a six-part series of posts on the BGR blog. The first in the series can be found [here](#). Projects are arranged alphabetically by country. International projects precede the U.S. projects, described in the final post. Thanks are due to Kim Behan, BGR Executive Director; Patti Price, Chair of the Projects Committee; and Jessie Benjamin, Carla Prater, and Jennifer Russ, who helped prepare the material used in this series of posts.

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## Executive Restructuring of BGR

**By BGR Staff** - Over its life span of eight years, Buddhist Global Relief has grown at a pace that none of us could have foreseen when we founded the organization in June 2008. The work of BGR has filled a niche in the field of Socially Engaged Buddhism, putting “conscientious compassion” into effect on a truly global scale. To facilitate BGR’s development, we found it necessary to make some major changes at the executive level. The workload being maintained by the Executive Director has expanded to the point where a division of duties is mandatory. At the last Board meeting, the BGR Board decided to divide the management of BGR’s operations into two positions: an Executive Director and a Director of Programs.

Kim Behan has been Executive Director of BGR since 2009, after serving a year on the Board. As ED, Kim has put in an outstanding performance, guiding our organization to its present level of success. All along, Kim has said that the work she enjoys best as ED has been directing the programs and working with our program partners. For this reason, under the new arrangement she will take on the position of Director of Programs, in which capacity she will focus on overseeing the implementation of our projects, working with our partners, and also helping with the volunteers.



The position of Executive Director will be taken over by our present Treasurer, Tom Spies. Tom has worked in the finance and accounting field for 33 years, his most recent position being CFO for CSI Management Group, a Human Resource Outsourcing firm in Wayne, New Jersey. He has held the position as Treasurer of BGR from 2008 until the present, and has a proven track record of excellence in this position. He has always been prompt, precise, and thorough in his work. Tom recently retired from his professional career as a Certified Public Accountant, which allows him to serve BGR almost full time. As ED, Tom would oversee the work of the Communications, Finances, IT, and Fundraising Committees. Tom still needs a modest level of income to support his family and thus BGR will be offering him a modest salary. Carla Prater will assist the new Executive Director through the transition and will remain as assistant to the Programs Director. The post of Treasurer will be taken over by BGR Vice-Chairperson, David Braughton.

The formal transition to the new executive structure will take place on July 1, 2016, the first day of our 2016–17 fiscal year. We expect that this new arrangement will enhance the work of BGR as we continue to grow and expand and make BGR more effective in pursuing our mission of combating poverty, chronic hunger, and malnutrition around the world.

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## Concert to Feed the Hungry



**By Dan Blake** - For the past five years, the Concert To Feed The Hungry has presented inspiring performances from a wide range of jazz and world musicians, bringing the music together with Buddhist Global Relief's mission to help alleviate hunger in poor communities around the world. Thanks to the concert's dedicated and talented volunteer team, the concert is steadily gaining a footing in New York City's art world, having received coverage in the *New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Villager*, among other publications.

The fifth annual Concert to Feed the Hungry was held on April 9, 2016, at the Middle Collegiate Church in downtown Manhattan. Reverend Adriene Thorne and her team provided an intimate and welcoming space for the concert, which featured the Colombian folkloric group La Cumbiamba eNeYé, Grammy-nominated pianist and composer Fred Hersch, guitarist and songwriter Becca Stevens, percussionist Rogerio Boccato, and the singer Jean Rohe. We also heard a special guest performance by the chairperson of Buddhist Global Relief, Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi!

Year after year, the concert deepens my faith in the power of music to express the profoundly wholesome aspiration for humanity that is embodied by the work of BGR and its partner projects. I am reminded of a phenomenon acousticians refer to as "sympathetic vibration," which occurs when something or someone moves in sync with a sound, creating a profound and mysterious sense of harmony. In this way, musical performance can move our minds toward greater receptivity to feel compassion for the suffering of others.

To be a musician requires a heightened sensitivity to what others play, and by extension what they feel, moment by moment. When I started to study and practice the Dharma some time ago, I began noticing similarities between the deep listening advocated by my musical community and the teaching of compassion as a spiritually divine abiding (*brahmavihara*). Many musicians often wonder how our music can be of direct benefit to people around the world who suffer so needlessly, given the fact that performing on its own cannot feed the hungry.



The Concert to Feed the Hungry grew out of this reflection. I have found a remarkable moral synchronicity that occurs between artists, volunteers, and audience members at the concert that is as inspiring as it is deeply harmonious. This harmony reflects what Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi has called "conscientious compassion", which he describes as "the deep voice within that bids us strive to mend a world torn apart by violence, exploitation, and injustice." Buddhist Global Relief provides a vehicle for people to act upon this voice through their donations, volunteer work, and through performing at or attending the concert or fundraising walks. In lending our efforts to BGR's

mission, we can rest assured that we are providing a morally upright and urgently needed corrective to the devastating impacts of globalization upon the world's most impoverished communities.

The Concert to Feed the Hungry is a joyful celebration of the positive impact Buddhist Global Relief has on so many communities around the world. As we continue to expand our creative vision for the concert, I remain ever grateful

for this opportunity to see such talented, diverse, and compassionate people come together to serve our global human community.

*Dan Blake is a professional jazz saxophonist and a Board member of BGR. He has been the executive producer of all the Concerts to Feed the Hungry.*

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## How You Can Help BGR

Interested in volunteering for BGR? By joining our team you will meet others who share your values and are working to put compassion into action and help create a better world. Some volunteers need to be located in a particular place, but most can work from home, wherever that may be. Please check the list of Volunteer Opportunities on our website and contact our volunteer coordinator at [miroehm@buddhistglobalrelief.org](mailto:miroehm@buddhistglobalrelief.org) for further information.

As always, donations to BGR are welcome. You can donate by PayPal or credit card on the [BGR website](#), on [FirstGiving](#), [Hopsie](#), or by check mailed to:

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Thank you for your help!