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Red Dot in Haiti, Tear Drops on Long Island

by Andrew Malekoff

Ludmyard Charles, 16, said that when she got home the phone rang. It was her father. He told her to get a glass of water. Then he asked her if she was sitting down. Next, he shared the heartbreaking news that her aunt, Ludmyard, was killed in the earthquake. The aunt she was named after who was pregnant, had lost her life when the earth opened up. The girl's eyes filled up and she said of her aunt - "We were like sisters."

A few days ago, I had the privilege of meeting Ludmyard and six of her fellow Westbury High School students, all of whom have roots in Haiti. I asked them about the emotional aftershocks of the Jan. 12 earthquake that toppled national landmarks and shantytown homes and killed and injured untold hundreds of thousands of people in and around the capital city Port-au-Prince.

Each one of the four girls and three boys learned about the earthquake when they arrived home after being together in an after-school program led by North Shore Child and Family Guidance Center. Eighteen-year-old Vayola Justinian recalled, "When I got home my mom was crying. The TV was on. When I looked at the screen I saw a map of Haiti. There was a red dot."

I asked the students about the media coverage and they said that it was both good and bad. "It was good to have updates," said 18-year-old Joes Paraison, "but bad to see pictures of the dead and injured." The others nodded and Joes said, "By the second day it felt like my family was going crazy" watching television. He said that the faces on the screen were hard to see clearly, leading them to wonder if anyone of them was a family member. Joes then recalled a most troubling of images - "a truckload of dead children." Seeing such devastation from afar, including pictures of people buried underneath rubble, added to their feelings of helplessness and their wish to be there to help.

Their counselor Pascale Beaubrun, a native of Haiti, who is based at the Guidance Center's Leeds Place in Westbury, later said that they turned their sorrow into action by collecting money and contributing to the Yéle Haiti Earthquake Fund, a charity initiated by Grammy award-winning musician and producer, Wyclef Jean.

Myriam Jerome, 18, reasoned that it was better that the earthquake happened in the afternoon when everyone was out and about. Had it happened in the late evening when they were asleep in their homes, she explained, there would have been an even greater human toll.

Unwinding from a day at school, Michael Belizaire, 17, played a video game, while the youngest in this group, 15-year-old Policia Jean, turned on MTV. Both were later alerted by family members to tune in to CNN. In a short time they, too, saw the red dot in Haiti. Michael told us that his family's house in Haiti was near the National Palace in Champs de Mars. He worried about his father and uncle who, he later learned, had survived.

Joes said that he tried to "move on" and had discovered that it was not as easy as it sounded. "Each day when I go to school, I try to forget, but every day when I get there, someone else is crying."

"How do you cope?" I asked. They turned to one another and gestured in a manner that emphasized their deep connection to one another. They talked about the support offered by groups of Haitian youths in school and in the community.

Camy Pierre, 16, said that it was important "to comfort one another and don't do anything reckless or lose control." I asked Camy what he meant by that. He said that some of their peers were insensitive and said hurtful things about Haiti. Michael chimed in and stated how important it was to always "think positive."

I asked about what they did when friends alone were not enough. One of the girls said that she was worried about a girlfriend who was so distraught that she thought she could hurt herself. When she realized that more than friendship was needed, she advised a trusted school counselor. All of them said that they were aware of where and who to go to for more specialized support in school and in the community and found support in that as well.

Expressions of helplessness and grief quickly turned to frustration and anger as they talked about disturbing phone calls from Haiti and learning about mass graves and rampant lawlessness and rape. I said that it must be unbearable to sit with such news. Joes emphasized the importance of talking and not allowing one's feelings to get "all bunched up."

Long after we said goodbye, I was left with a feeling of abiding respect and pride for this group of thoughtful and deeply empathic young people. They are, without a doubt, among the finest of Haiti's - and Long Island's - sons and daughters. Let us never forget them.