



Shersty Stanton, Haiti 2017-2019, Lumos Final Report

My feet first touched Haitian soil in December of 2012. I was immediately captivated by Haiti's mountains and chaos and her people, and something in my spirit understood and said, "I could live here forever." My heart physically hurt for my newfound brothers and sisters, and a longing to be and work with them drove many of my decisions from that day forward. Looking back now after my Lumos project and almost seven years later, I stand even more in awe of Haiti, her people, and how they have welcomed me in and altered the course of who I am becoming and where I am going. While my Lumos project morphed and pivoted from my original plan, I now see how each new project and alteration were in turn teaching me more about the Haitian people, myself, and how we all can and need to work together to create opportunities for today and hope for tomorrow.

In May of 2017 I left for Haiti to begin what I had planned to be a microfinance project based on savings groups for Disciples' Village. (DV). Fresh out of college and hyped up with anticipation, I hit the ground running with blinders on. After completing a census of our then four partnering villages and talking through and observing a few microfinance options, I decided to move forward with a trial savings group in our partnering village Vielo as I had confidence in their leadership and perceived household income from farming. "So, are we going to save our money or the money Disciples' Village is going to give us?" was the first question I was asked after holding an informational meeting for the community to present the idea of weekly meetings to save towards individual goals, participate in business lessons, and facilitate group-led micro loans. The color drained from my already white face as it hit me that I had gone about this all wrong. This was just the beginning of the removing of my blinders and opening my eyes to what it looks like for foreigners to come along side our Haitian brothers and sisters to partner together and to figure out life and intercultural living in the process.

Back at square one, I worked through where I had gone wrong, kept talking to other expats ahead of me in the process, and began researching other microfinance options that would better suit the population and demographics of Disciples' Village's partnering villages. I quickly

learned that job creation was necessary as many people did not have any excess income to save and for success and sustainability I needed to train up local leaders to provide input and facilitate my project aspirations. While still unsure of what the actuality of these findings would look like, I kept moving forward as project opportunities arose and ideas of what could be entered my vision.

While attempting to start up a savings group, I also welcomed the task of forecasting and planning the possibility of a chicken coop for job creation in our partnering village of Trouforban (TFB) in October of 2017. We welcomed our first chickens and employee shortly thereafter and provided eggs at wholesale prices to 4-5 egg sellers in the community. Overseeing the implementation, daily operations, growth and then decline of the coop proved to be a great introduction to business in Haiti and the challenges that come with it. Our eggs now feed kiddos at our school in TFB and we are looking to transition from layers to broilers. In addition to the chicken coop, business leader training also flowed from the need for local leaders to take ownership of future projects in each of our partnering villages. We spent a year and a half meeting biweekly to discuss ideas and concepts of business and entrepreneurship and how they can benefit each village according to local resources and needs. Today, one of my leaders now facilitates business training and micro loans for DV, two have received small loans to grow their businesses, and one has learned to sew to earn an income.



Several sewing projects have materialized over the course of my Lumos project in Haiti, some inherited and others spearheaded from the beginning. Initially I 'joined' an embroidery class for local young ladies taught by a local seamstress in the fall of 2018. This was my door into healthier relationships with some gals who had previously heckled me for my clothes, money, etc. In January 2019, I began to host this course and we added our girls from Alex's House Children's Home*. They have now learned to hand sew coin pouches, pleated school uniform skirts, potholders, and some are still working on embroidery while others will go on to learn to use the treadle machine. I believe these skills and the life lessons learned in the process will propel them to a brighter future one day.

One of the greatest joys and most fruitful projects has been the beginning of a small potholder sewing business in Dhal, the least developed of our partnering villages. This scattered community has little opportunity to earn an income other than farming, and these ladies have been eager to improve their craft and receptive to our lessons. They have worked through our business training, prepared simple plans, and I hope to help start up their “ti commerce” soon to get revenue flowing through their hands and more access to goods in their rural community.

About a year into working in Haiti, I came across a microfinance training curriculum translated into Haitian Creole and designed with stories and illustrations to cater to an illiterate population. Another year later (Spring 2019), and I had trustworthy Haitian leaders, a greater understanding of the language of business in Haiti, and a working car to get us to a “Train the Trainer” workshop to learn to implement the curriculum and structure micro loans in our communities. We quickly tailored the program to fit our needs, decided to focus on women, and ran a trial round of training and loans in the summer of 2019. It was a process of gathering together when roadblocks would allow, meeting individually with each woman to work through her plans, and distribute and track the businesses and loans. We found that women from lower income households were the most receptive and eager to learn, and we will continue to tweak our model and take the training to other DV partnering villages. We have now taught in Dhal, Kaliko, and Barbancourt, and will provide loans to viable plans as opportunities arise.



In addition to chickens, business leader training, sewing, and business training and micro loans, I have participated in several other programs, projects, and small businesses associated with DV throughout my time in Haiti. I originally led our DV summer intern program but passed it along when it began to take away from my microfinance work. Since the beginning of my work with DV, I have also overseen our Alex’s House small businesses, a cold drink service for our young men and a souvenir store for our young ladies—providing hands on training in business, money management, and customer service. On rare occasion, I have also assisted with our Healthy Moms Healthy Babies program and communicating back and forth with doctors in the US to get treatment for our people when they cannot get to the hospital, etc. Haiti quickly turns one into a Jack of all trades, as every area of life influences business and the economy.

There are an innumerable about of lessons and insights I have learned or been confronted with throughout my time as a Lumos traveler in Haiti, many business/development related and others interpersonal and intercultural, but nothing rings as true as Theodore Roosevelt's profound statement that "No one cares how much you know until they know how much you care." Much of the journey of my project can be summarized in the transformation of my efforts from project and fact driven to people and relationship driven. And that has made all the difference.



Haitian culture is quite collective and inviting and its people generous in scarcity, blunt and quick to joke, loving until it hurts. I observed and experienced that sharing is a way of life and survival, and financial planning and savings not a luxury many have. I did not always know these cultural ways, however, as it took a good while for me to overcome my "otherness", foreign status, and the occasional person looking to financially take advantage of a naïve young woman. I began to more fully experience the joys of living in Haiti when my mindset shifted from covering in my differences to capitalizing on similarities and the extra attention I receive for standing out in a crowd. I truly believe any one of my Haitian brothers or sisters would take the shirt off their back, feed me the food that was supposed to go in their mouth, and give me their bed if I needed a place to stay. The real question I have been confronted with is, would I do the same? And what is a healthy amount of participation in community?

While I still struggle each day to contribute to Haitian culture and my neighborhood in a way that is healthy for everyone, I can see how this new family has stretched me to become more compassionate, humble, fluid, courageous, broken, and sensitive to the needs of others in just two short years of observing them. I am forever in awe of the strength and resiliency of the Haitian people, their grace in my failures, and willingness to partner with me to unify our efforts for progress and opportunity today and hope for tomorrow.

My time in Haiti working with Disciples' Village through the Lumos Travel Award has grown me and set a clearer course for my future. I'm thankful for the projects and circumstances that helped me embrace the small victories, gave me the humility to ask hard questions, immersed me into cultural activities that stretched my thinking and view of the world, forced me to find common ground with others and to take ownership of my weaknesses/strengths and in turn taught me to leverage them for the betterment of myself and others. I am forever changed

because of my time as a Lumos Scholar and being welcomed in by the Haitian people, and now it is time to go use what I've learned and who I've become to go change whatever part of the world I find myself in and lead others to do the same.



*Alex's House Children's Home was started after the earthquake in 2010 to rescue kiddos off of the streets in Port au Prince. By 2016 the ministry had expanded beyond our kids and into local villages, and Disciples' Village was created to work in orphan prevention. We still care for and train up our 33 future leaders today and look forward to the time it is their turn to continue on our work.