



The Teddy Bear Journey Begins

directed by Laura Simms

in the Camp on Rues des Frères in Port-au-Prince, Haiti May 2012

sponsored by *Children of the Earth, inc.,*

THE TEDDY BEAR JOURNEY sponsored by Children of the Earth and designed by storyteller Laura Simms launched a new arts program for young children in a small camp in Port au Prince, Haiti. Our report will describe the Teddy Bear Journey in the context of the children's art program. The teddy bears instigated a brilliant surprising and joyful event that was loved by the children, and everyone else in the camp. The lovely bears were irresistible. They had tremendous significance for the children who became their caretakers. May 2012



DESCRIPTION:

TIMOUN ESPERAYSON is an ongoing arts and resilience project for children ages 3 - 10 who have been living in tents in a camp on Route des Freres in Port au Prince, Haiti since January 2010.



TIMOUN ESPERYASON includes games, storytelling, and arts activities each Saturday morning. We are planning to expand the program to twice a week this September. The program is facilitated by three Haitian educators living in the camp. The Teddy Bear Journey Launch took place in May 2012.

For more than two years, over thirty-five children under the age of ten, have lived in makeshift and often devastated tents in a small camp behind the temporary buildings of a school that was destroyed during the earthquake in January 2010. Although many of the children live with at least one parent, they have inadequate sanitation, security, and lack continued supervision and creative activities. My intention was to re-instate and expand an arts program with storytelling, art and games that was begun as an emergency psychosocial program with Mercy Corps, inc. in the aftermath of the earthquake.. It was dismantled after six months. The new project was named by concerned parents. It is called ***Timoun Esperayson-“children inspired.”*** The function of this weekly program is to engage children in imaginative, physical, and social activities that promote resilience, fun, self-worth, focus, relationship building, safety and creativity.

The program brings a compassionate and creative process into camp life for young children. Laura Simms collaborates with Haitian educators, artists, play specialist and mothers to design the project. The Teddy Bear event was suggested by Nina Meyerhof with whose support we could not have made this happen. We are incredibly grateful to Children of the Earth for their generous gift to these children whose lives are enhanced by the teddy bears and the continuous joy they provide. There is no way to measure the intimate feelings of tenderness and kindness that the children were able to express with their teddy’s in heart and hands

DESCRIPTION OF THE TEDDY BEAR JOURNEY -

*The Teddy Bear Journey was an overwhelming success.

*The following outlines the preparation, three-day Teddy Bear Journey and its effect.

PREPARATION :

I purchased 60 teddy bears in three sizes in New York. I also ordered 60 “teddy bear sacks” to hold the bears and keep them clean and safe in the tents. The bags were handmade by a women’s collective in Delhi, India using colorful and strong cloth with a soft handle . they were spacious enough to fit the teddy bear, crayons and a notebook, to be safely stored in the tent. I purchased rolls of paper, markers, crayons, and tape in Haiti on arrival , so that the children could follow their teddy bear story event with colorful art expression. The teddy bears were so successful that we had twenty more children come into the tent and went to a local market and found other teddy bears. So every child in the area could have one! My visit and the Teddy Bear project was inspired by seven year old Dudley who on a visit last July 2011 asked me to come back especially to tell the children stories again. Thank you Dudley! Dudley’s portrait is below and a picture of him posing with his and his sister’s teddy bear.



Day One: Gathering:

I had not been to the camp for seven months. We planned an initial gathering simply to meet the children that would participate and to tell them about the bears that were arriving the next day. Word spread and by 10 am there were nearly 80 children of all ages, with parents and teenagers entering the camp from all directions. The excitement was overwhelming and we were unable to share a story or information about the teddy bears. However my young translator Iseult and I—with the help of several friends of *Timoun Esperayson* and the mothers of OFEDA (A powerful women's group in the camp) - organized enormous circle games. At first the children who were least accustomed to organized activities were chaotic and far too ebullient to make a circle. Through patience and complete surrender to their joy, we finally were able to organize a huge circle with call and response and gesture games. Afterwards we passed out paper and crayons and let the children draw whatever they desired. It was an astonishing gathering. I requested Ofeda women who were in charge of organizing gatherings that the next day, for the distribution of the teddy bears, only children under ten be invited.



Day Two: Teddy Bears Find Homes and the Teddy Bear Story

We arrived at the camp early (myself, Iseult, photographer Ani Feuerman and her daughter Lucinda). Some of the older children in the camp, who could not stay away, helped us pick up debris and broken glass, stray pieces of plastic and garbage that filled two black trash bags. We cleared the space under the tree near the tents that are normally used for the women's group and Health Information. By 10:30 am fifty small children gathered.

This time we planned thirty minutes of games with increasingly more focus and fun to use and gather children's energy. Every adult on hand helped out so that even those children who stood frozen in space, unaccustomed to engagement, were assisted gently to lift their arms and participate. Slowly, over the thirty minutes all the children began to play together. They recalled the games we had played during my visit last summer and we extended the game time to include everything they wanted to do. By 11:15am the fifty children were glad to enter and sit side by side leaning against the insides of a grey tent.

I had carried the teddy bears and the sacks in a large black canvas suitcase. It was behind me, zipped up and out of view. The children worn out and well engaged sat expectantly. I relied heavily on my young translator Iseult.

I told the children a story. I began...

TEDDY BEAR TALE

When I was in New York, where I live, a woman called me one morning on the telephone. She told me that she had found a large black canvas bag on the street. She opened it. Inside were 50 teddy bears. They were in three sizes. But there was a tear in each bear's eye. She said, "Oh my! What are you teddy bears doing here?" They explained that they had lost their homes and were living in the sack. They longed to be held by children.

The bears said they wanted to go home with children who would love them and sleep with them, hug them and take care of them.

The woman called me because she knew that I told stories to children. She asked me if I knew some very kind and loving children who would be able to take care of the bears and make them feel loved and safe.

I said, "I know many children in Haiti and I think they are wonderful children."

I asked the children if they would be able to take care of a teddy bear each? A forest of hands went up.

"I am so happy" I said.

"Would you like to see the bears and each take one home?" Again every hand went up.

The bears have had a long and hard journey and may be shy or afraid. So let me open the bag very slowly and we must try to be very quiet and not scare them.

I rolled the bag gently to the center of the circle and slowly and ceremonially unzipped it. I peeked in and looked at the children. Their eyes were huge with expectation but they were very quiet not to disturb or frighten the bears.

Then I told them about the sacks where the bears could be carried around. Also, it would be like a little bed for them at night. “Teddy bears-when they are safe and loved-enjoy dreaming.,” I added. The children were happy when I revealed the many colored sacks.

Then one by one each child stood up and came toward me. I put a sack around their necks and shoulders and gave them a teddy bear. Each child held the bear gently and showed it to someone else and then put it back in the sack. Most of them were arranging the bears so the bears could look out at what was going on. Then they watched each other receiving the bears. Fortunately, there was one teddy bear for each of the very young children.

I told them how I could now call the woman in New York and tell her that the teddy bears were safe and happy. We took two or three children outside at a time so they could be photographed with their bears. They were exultant and finally we had group photos.

Iseult ended the day with the children having a circle game that included their showing each other their teddy bears and naming them. We planned then to return the next day to make a big celebration welcome card for the teddies. It would hang on the wall, against the temporary school building .for the coming Mother's Day celebrations.











Day Three

All the children returned the next day with their teddy bears in their arms or in the sacks. Around the tree near the porch in front of the school, Iseult led them in games again. They played beautifully—with apparent zeal and attention. They were after all the caretakers of tender teddies!

We taped a twelve-foot roll of white paper to the ground and scattered markers and crayons just as we had two days before. We organized the children into groups around the paper so that they could draw freely and express themselves with their art. I am emphasizing the organization because it is so vital to the well being of these children, who are living in such difficult environments to feel cared for and to gain a sense of internal discipline (not rigidity) so they can play and communicate with each other with ease.



They worked intently for nearly two hours creating a colorful border in celebration of the teddy bears' Mother's Day party. Afterwards we supplied snacks and took a tour of what they had created. Each child lifted their teddy bear to look at the big card. Iseult ended the day with half hour of circle games and dances. Teenagers and parents who had stood around watching and longing for teddy bears themselves helped us clean up afterwards.





before



With Teddy



But there were another twenty kids, a bit older, who didn't have bears. So we searched in the markets until we found someone who had children's toys and purchased twenty bears. These bears had no sacks but we gave them to the other children along with snacks and everyone was delighted to introduce their bears to one another.



Everyday I found myself smiling as I watched children walking around the camp with their colorful teddy bear sacks. When they caught my eyes they would hold up the bear and wave. Sometimes walking through the camp I saw a child alone with his or her bear in a private reverie and simply walked away allowing the teddy's to continue their magic.



CONCLUSION:

It was a great success. I could never have imagined the power of the teddy bears to bring solace and joy to the children in the way that they did. Perhaps what was the most secret potency of the event was making the children, the caretakers and parents of vulnerable creatures. It felt empowering and poignant. The teddy bears began our season of *Timoun Esperason* with a great start. The bears were the providers of immense happiness and healing. The children of the camp, having surely understood intimately how losing their homes and needing love must feel, were the proud owners of the Bears.



THANK YOU CHILDREN OF THE EARTH and NINA



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