

## ISSUES

# The Perfect Way to (Dis)Honor Columbus Day

*One morning a few months after my reign of Hapless Recreation Volunteer began, Sister X called me into her air-conditioned office. "I have a very special project for you. We need to do something about Christopher Columbus. The children should know more about the heroes of Haiti."*

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The nickname I was assigned within months of moving to Port-au-Prince, Haiti to do volunteer work was "gratay blan" which is best translated "the scratching white person." It was perhaps not an entirely kind nickname, but it was accurate.

This is how I came to live in Haiti: After a few rather uncomfortable semesters at Mid-America Bible College (slogan for that era of my life: What Is A Big Dyke Like You Doing In A Conservative Environment Like This) it became obvious it was not the right place for me. What was less obvious was where I might fit in better. Since I had no idea, I left college with a goal that was as vague as it was heartfelt: I wanted to help people.

An adult from the church I attended mentioned that her brother, a veterinarian working in Haiti, had heard there was a school for kids with orthopedic and sensory disabilities in Port-au-Prince that desperately needed volunteers. Apparently they just needed someone to help out with activities for the kids in the afternoon. Absolutely no special skills needed.

"No special skills," I thought, in the way you do when you're 19 and possessed of what my therapist calls deep biological optimism. "That describes me perfectly." And true enough, I hadn't developed many skills, and certainly no special ones. I was supremely qualified.

I wrote to Sister X, the now deceased American nun who ran the school and volunteered my no-special-skills self. I also saved money from my summer camp job to buy an airline ticket. This was the total of my preparation.

My first week as a volunteer I taught the kids to make paper airplanes, which they immediately used to pelt each other in the head. In retrospect, since what was in the recreation supply closet was almost as limited as my arts and crafts knowledge, this may have been my most successful activity all year.

I learned Kreyol on the job, from the kids. This is an excellent way to learn a language quickly. Six weeks into the experience I was attempting to quell the mass chaos that was erupting among the children as I taught them to make paper boats. I thought I was saying "everyone please listen" ("tout moun koute") but to the children's delight I actually said "tout moun krache." In English? "Everyone please spit." The kids, of course, complied with my actual rather than intended instruction and I, of course, never mistook those two words again.

This method of instruction also results in a highly specialized vocabulary. I knew how to say "pa fè sa" ("don't do that") and "M' pa't wè li, m' sèlman te wè ou" ("I didn't see him, I only saw you") before I knew how to indicate an activity was happening in the future and before I knew the names of all but the most common foods. In addition, I only learned the words that were most fun for the kids to teach me; if I asked what something was called and there was a vulgar and a non-vulgar word choice, you can guess which one the kids provided.

Even now, more than 20 years later, occasionally a Haitian adult will blanch at my choice of vocabulary. I've learned to immediately backtrack "I'm sorry, I learned Kreyol from children. Could you please tell me the more polite way to say that?"



*Me, through one of the kid's eyes, complete with spiral perm and ever expanding ringworm lesion. Accurate, except I hope the ringworm wasn't really green.*

Sister X was right about one thing: the school desperately needed volunteers or at least someone to help out in the afternoons. The kids -- who mostly came in from provinces to the only school at the time that served students with disabilities -- were overcrowded in their dorms and very bored. After 3:30 p.m., when classes were done, it was not unusual to turn the corner in a hallway and find two kids, each hopping on one foot while they attempted to beat the other with a removed prosthetic leg (hence, the hopping). Please note these were not titanium limbs made for running the New York Marathon or competing in the Olympics, they were heavy-duty wood prostheses appropriate for village life and climbing up the side of deforested mountains. Nothing about this particular game -- nor the many similar activities the kids had devised -- was safe.

Providing recreation was almost a defensive act.

Although I tried to help the kids have fun that wouldn't result in breaking prosthetic or real limbs, I was overwhelmed, inexperienced and frequently out of ideas. We had few supplies and the ages of the kids ranged from four to 19 years. I was hot, impatient, immature and all too often short with them.

I also managed to contract ringworm on my face which I ignored until the fungus covered one entire cheek and people began assuming it was a scar from a car accident. It itched constantly and so I would rub my face, especially when I was thinking of a word, which was all the time. Hence the previously mentioned nickname "grate blan." The scratching white person.

Things were going swell.

One morning a few months after my reign of Hapless Recreation Volunteer began, Sister X called me into her air-conditioned office. "I have a very special project for you. We need to do something about Christopher Columbus. The children should know more about the heroes of Haiti."

I thought she was joking and played along.

"Oh, maybe a special commemorative play?" I said with a wink.

Once I had mentioned it, she would not let go of the idea. I didn't know how to stop the messed up colonialist train for which I had apparently just built a track. The more I protested, the more she persisted. I didn't yet know to defy authority -- I was really afraid of making her angry -- so I finally just lapsed into silence until she assumed this meant assent and dismissed me.

I had never exactly said "no" but on the other hand, there was no ethical way I could comply with her instructions. I was pretty much useless as a recreation director. But even if I couldn't teach the kids to latch-hook or make folding paper lanterns or play soccer, at least I needed to abstain from forcing them to spend a third of the school year artistically celebrating centuries of greed and racism-inspired genocide.

The next afternoon, I grabbed five of the oldest kids and took them to an empty classroom to explain the situation. We were all silent, just a bunch of hot, angry teenagers, stewing in our grumbling resentment.

After some time one of the kids got up and began the most favorite of all the school's pastimes: physically imitating another kid's disability. As Emmanuel, who was partially sighted, pretended to be a blind classmate, stumbling around, dramatically bumping into walls and falling over, another kid said "Oh look, it's Christopher Columbus discovering Haiti by accident."

Thus began the script. The kids conceived a play that was something between a classic farce and a "Saturday Night Live" skit. Christopher Columbus became a bumbling character who landed in Haiti (as in real life) by accident, but the kids added a new twist: the ship became lost because Columbus had accidentally used the only available map as toilet paper. When the boat landed in Haiti, Columbus fell onto the island and squashed three small children in the process. Anytime there was a large pot of rice and beans within 12 feet of him, he took multiple tripping steps which always resulted in him inexplicably falling completely into the pot. Always face first.

Then the kids built a huge paper mache goat, which they would throw through the scene whenever Columbus spoke, in a particular jarring attempt at establishing an objective correlative. The implication, I guess, was that his voice was so grating that it caused even normally calm farm animals to run in potentially suicidal horror.

The Haitian staff would occasionally stop in for rehearsals, shake their hands and laugh. And although Sister X would sometimes ask how the play was going, I always nodded and gave her the thumbs up. I'd never crossed her before, so she had no reason to question further. I was not less afraid of making the boss lady angry, but I certainly couldn't imagine stopping the joy I was watching unfold before me.

The day of the play's debut, the parents who lived in town filed in, and Sister X sat on the front row. The kids had practiced tirelessly and I knew they were ready but their extreme enthusiasm had an unexpected result. They were so excited that every bit of physical comedy they had rehearsed was magnified threefold. Christopher Columbus tripped four times in each scene. He was flailing so mightily into the pots that I feared that he could easily sustain a concussion. The objective correlative goat flew so hard and so fast -- accompanied by desperate soulful bleating sounds -- that it would often crash into the opposite wall sustaining moderate structural damage each time. By the time the play was almost finished, all that was left of the goat was the head. A disembodied goat head flying through a dramatic scene adds a certain flourish that even the unmarred goat had not.

But there was one more surprise for the audience as well as for me: the kids had rewritten the end of the play -- without my knowledge -- late the night before. The revised and very dramatic conclusion was inspired by a then-recent event in Haiti's history: after the coup that ousted the Duvaliers, a group of angry protesters had ripped out the city's statue of Columbus, carried it to the port and dumped it into the ocean. The audience and I looked on in surprise as the kid playing Christopher Columbus began his closing line but was rushed by the entire cast. They hustled him from the room where the play was taking place into the adjacent courtyard. The audience stood up and craned their necks to see the conclusion of the action: the kids escorting a flailing Christopher Columbus (who could barely contain his delight at being part of this unexpected ending) to the deck surrounding the shallow therapy pool where he was, without further dialogue, pushed in.

As Christopher Columbus emerged dripping while unsuccessfully attempting to look dejected from the therapy pool, the crowd cheered and clapped. The kids looked the happiest I had ever seen them and Sister X looked very very very angry.

I was a volunteer so she couldn't exactly fire me, but she did subject me to a one-hour lecture about knowing my place, and then didn't talk to me for two months.

It was completely worth it.

Read more from [Kelli Dunham](#).

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