Empowering the women of Haiti to shape their destiny

"Most Haitians understand that education is the ticket to a good future. As a schoolgirl I would joyously rifle through my new textbooks to enjoy the intoxicating scent of knowledge. Learning is my passion and passing on knowledge to help others succeed is both my work and my personal mission," says Myriam Narcisse, '23G, a graduate of the master in community development online program at UNH.

After earning a bachelor's degree in law from Haiti's Faculté de Droit et des Sciences Économiques in 1993, Narcisse worked several jobs before accepting a position with Fonkoze, a nonprofit organization that offers women microfinancing loans and development programs designed to lift them out of poverty. She later received training from Université Quisqueya in Haiti where she banked new skills toward self-employment as a business consultant.

Within Haiti's unstable political environment, poor economic outlook and youthful population (50% are under the age of 34), Haitian women bear the heaviest load from the resulting cycle of illiteracy, poverty and domestic violence. This repetitive pattern impacts the country's ability to move toward future prosperity and peace.

Having joined the Haiti Adolescent Girls Network (HAGN) in 2015, Narcisse currently serves as its executive director. The organization's programming uses a multi-pronged approach, partnering with local resources to provide girls with the tools to safely navigate through their adolescent years and forge stable lives by making positive choices.

"The formula for sustainable success is based on what we call the 'double bottom line.' Small business loans are only the start of fostering financial independence among women. To be based on the sustainable development (SDG) goals established by the United Nations to "leave no one behind," the organization offers empowerment programs based on four key categories: reproductive health, gender-based violence, financial autonomy and leadership. The most popular courses teach young women to take control of their reproductive health and speak honestly with their parents about their needs and goals.

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successful, women must find their voice in society and change current cultural norms to step into a space of greater autonomy.

Narcisse is known by her colleagues as “Mama HAGN,” not only because of her commitment to improving the lives of Haitian women, but because she also fosters a space for open dialogue. Staff seek personal or professional advice with the comfort of knowing she will respond with their best interest at the core of their conversation. She explains that the HAGN team embodies the concept of “mon espace” (my space) which places trust and support at the heart of their mission, internally and externally.

“The formula for sustainable success is based on what we call the 'double bottom line,'” says Narcisse. "Small business loans are only the start of fostering financial independence among women. To be successful, women must find their voice in society and change current cultural norms to step into a space of greater autonomy."

To demonstrate the organization's success, Narcisse paraphrases the words of an adolescent girl who participated in their development programs: “HAGN opened a new world for me. They taught me that I had the right to say 'no.'” This simple word symbolizes the power to transform a generation’s negative pattern of sexual abuse and domestic violence into a healthy, self-directed destiny.

To strengthen her repertoire as a changemaker, Narcisse enrolled in the master in community development online program at UNH and completed the degree within a year. Bolstered by the steadfast support of UNH faculty and staff, Narcisse rapidly gained confidence in the unfamiliar online format, linking her academic and personal calendars to keep track of assignment deadlines. For elective courses, she searched the global conflict and human resources online program curriculum, aligning her selections with the needs of her work in support of the Haitian community.

“My faculty advisor, Sanjeev Sharma, was my guardian angel through the challenges that face a working professional returning to school. The course materials directly applied to my workplace experience and offered real-life solutions that I employ every day. I miss the weekly contact with my UNH family,” states Narcisse with a rueful smile. “During my visit to campus for the graduation ceremony, I fell in love with beautiful New Hampshire.”

Grounded by the belief that women possess the power to transform social chaos into balance, she leans on her faith as a renewing inspiration in her daily work. “My job is to offer women and girls the space they need to develop skills for a positive transformation and my master’s degree gives me more tools for success,” Narcisse proudly declares.

The well-deserved nickname “Mama HAGN” speaks to the marriage of faith, passion and practicality in her work on behalf of Haitian girls and women.

WROTEN BY:
Gwendolyn Goguelet (/unhtoday/contributor/gwendolyn-goguelet) | UNH Online | unh.online@unh.edu (mailto:unh.online@unh.edu)
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