

Renise Matters

In many areas of the world, houses don't have addresses. Central power and water don't exist for people who live there; people like Renise. As best we can tell, Renise turned twelve last year. She doesn't know her birthday, so her age is kind of fuzzy. An unknown birthday is unheard of in the U.S., but that was the least of Renise's problems. Renise was sold to a family acquaintance, but was allowed to return home briefly; just in time to hold her dying mother in her arms. She stayed in the home with her mom's corpse for days not knowing what to do. With nowhere else to go, Renise returned to work as a *restavek*. Her father, who she was never close to, died shortly thereafter.



We don't know exactly why Renise was sold. Maybe they needed money. More likely, her mom knew she was sick, and this was the only way to ensure Renise would have a place to stay. Whatever the reason, Renise became a *restavek*. The term literally means "one who stays with" and is as well known in Haiti as the practice itself. Best case, children are treated fairly well, but for Renise and for thousands of other less-fortunate children, they are treated like donkeys, less than human.

Due to lack of infrastructure, water is often carried by hand in Haiti. Walking miles with a five-gallon, plastic bucket of water is back-breaking work. It's also one way a *restavek* earns their keep. Trip after trip, day after day, week after week, child slaves go to the well by themselves and return with their owner's water. That was life for Renise, a little girl walking alone, unprotected in a rough-and-tumble world.

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On one such trip, whatever innocence Renise had left was violently robbed by men whose depravity defies description. A 12-year-old orphaned, raped, *restavek* would soon learn she was pregnant.

Pregnant *restavek* children can be a nuisance for their owners. They won't carry as much water as they once did. Medical care is inconvenient and costly. Not to mention the shame of the situation; that might rub off on other members of their household. What was obvious, yet unspoken, became painfully clear. This family didn't care about Renise; not one bit. Get out! "Homeless" was added to Renise's tragic life list.

On January 12th, Renise was a 13-year-old, orphaned, raped, pregnant, former *restavek*, living on the streets of the largest city and in the poorest country in the western hemisphere. What else could go wrong? The earth shook, and it wouldn't stop. Buildings fell. Even the strongest and wealthiest feared for their lives. Renise wept. Her world had fallen apart, and no one cared...not yet.

Carol walked to her home in Bon Repos, just north of Port Au Prince. Devastation and despair dominated the day. Hundreds of thousands were fleeing the city. More than a million were living in squalor. Food and water were scarce. Security and privacy fleeting. Then, she saw a girl. Alone. Crying. Vulnerable. Renise was sitting on the street in the rubble of post-quake Haiti.

Carol approached and asked her basic questions: where are your parents? Where are you living? How long since you've had something to eat? Renise stopped crying long enough to answer. For the first time in a long time, Renise had a friend. Carol brought Renise home. She gave her a meal and a safe place to stay. Maybe, just maybe, it wasn't too late.

Soon thereafter, Carol took Renise to child protection services at UNICEF. UNICEF Disaster Relief leadership in Haiti worked in month-long shifts. Stenner was in charge for the next few weeks. *The GO Project*, specifically Rob Boyer met Stenner at the UN Cluster meetings. Cluster meetings are central in UN disaster relief protocol. The fruit of attending those first meetings? Stenner's call to Boyer.

STENNER: Rob, I have a thirteen-year-old, homeless *restavek*, can you all take her?

BOYER: Sure

STENNER: Rob, she's also pregnant.

When Rob brought Renise to the GO Project's Orphan Transition Village, Renise was losing. By the second or third tragic fact, Renise's tale seemed more like a nightmare than real life. As hard as we tried, could we really understand the darkness of the valley from which she came? It numbed us. It overwhelmed her. Her eyes never left the ground.

Moise Vaval, a gentleman in the true sense of the word, tried to connect with her that first day.

MOISE: Renise, you're safe here. Renise, please look at me. It's going to be ok.

Nothing. No response, except stillness and sadness.

The next morning, we tried our hardest to get Renise to acknowledge us. After we clowned awhile, she did give us a small wave. She probably felt sorry for us, but we were encouraged none-the-less. That afternoon, she left her tent and sat twenty feet away from a food truck we unloaded. Later that evening, Beth "Mamma" Fox and Renise held hands and took a walk together. In less than 24 hours this child who would soon be a mother had found a mother figure for herself. All who saw it were pierced by the transformational power of love. Pure and simple - love conquers evil.

The life inside Renise's womb mirrored the new life in her soul. Teams of people came to play with Renise and the other children at the OTV. *WorldVision* brought her a doll. Someone slipped her an iPod. Along the way, in this wacky, post-quake GO Project world of Bloncs, committed Haitians, and friendly peers, Renise found her smile. She had a family. She belonged. It wasn't too late for Renise or for her baby.

Weekly visits to the doctor revealed part of His divine design. It was a little girl, but she was breach. Her head was at the twelve instead of the six. At less than 80 pounds, Renise would have probably needed a C-Section anyway, but now it was mandatory. One glance confirmed the due date of April 17th was based on some formula that didn't apply here. This baby would come early. Effective medical care and a personal birthing plan were critical.

Dr. Kelly was back in Haiti. A Boston College-trained thirty-something OB/GYN from San Francisco, Kelly was one of many wonderful ladies now in Renise's life. Momma Fox, Gladys who took Renise to weekly appointments, Laura Milbourn, and Dr. Kelly loved together to fill a void, to heal a wound. Even though she wasn't scheduled to perform the

C-Section, Dr. Kelly wanted to see Renise on Saturday, March 20th. The visit went well. The baby was fine, and Renise was HIV-negative; two reasons to celebrate!

Zagalo, a fourteen-year old boy was our other reason for going to Love a Child that morning. His right tibia was broken in the earthquake, and he needed his splint re-wrapped. He had put on some cologne before we left the OTV that morning. I guess he wanted to be prepared in case a cute nurse rewrapped his foot.

While Zagalo was receiving care, Renise lay down on a cot. Laura Milbourn rubbed Renise's back for at least thirty minutes. That precious picture of an American mom loving on Renise as if she were her own helped me temper my annoyance at how long it was taking to re-wrap Zagalo's foot. What was going on? Divine delay. If not for Zagalo, we would have been back in the truck and well off property.

When Renise woke up, she was in labor. She was in pain. Her baby was coming today, and she was scared. With the baby's head now at the nine, we had to find a hospital that could do the surgery immediately. We loaded Renise, Dr. Kelly, and the GO Crew in the back of a truck that would have been put to pasture in the US a long time ago and headed for the hospital. We were 45 minutes to an hour away.

Renise's prenatal visits had been at the best hospital in town. Her OB/Gyn was excellent as well, but he wasn't working that day. Not available. Remember this isn't the US, so we headed for a second facility. If we could find a team at the top place, we'd rather go there, but the baby wasn't waiting.

Twenty minutes later, it was confirmed. *Little Brothers/Little Sisters*, where Renise had visited, had a team that could deliver. Indeed they did. An OB/GYN team from Italy had been serving in Haiti as part of disaster relief efforts. Their plane left in a few hours. They had time for one more surgery.

Just before 2 p.m. Renise was wheeled into the Operating Room. Her water broke right before they began. New life entered the world at almost exactly the same time Moise's church was holding a memorial service for the eleven people from his congregation that went to Glory in the quake. Was this mere coincidence? Or was this another blatant attempt by God to show us that He is always working in our lives? More specifically, was this more confirmation that **life and death are in God's loving Hands?**

Twenty minutes later, I held Renise's daughter. What a beautiful child! Like all proud families, we wanted to shout the good news from the waiting room of the Haitian Hospital. We were so grateful for the miracle of new life. However, much work was left to ensure Renise and child would receive love and care post delivery. We needed to tend to that right away.

The rules had changed since we received Renise from UNICEF. She came to us with documentation that would fit on a Post-it note or the back of a used napkin. Almost nothing.



Kimberly, Renise's daughter.

The country was in chaos then, but now processes were catching up. We explained the situation to all who would listen, but to no avail. We needed new paperwork to prove we were the legal guardian of Renise and child. Without it, we could lose our relationship with both of them.

How would we get someone from UNICEF to validate and document this amazing story? Stenner, who had given us Renise on behalf of UNICEF, had long since returned to Europe. We were on our knees. We needed God to move.

God finishes what He starts. We trusted that. He used an earthquake to save the life of a 13-year-old girl. He brought physicians from two continents together to deliver her child. If we needed more evidence, His redeeming Hand is evident to all who simply see Renise smile.

Beth Fox had flown back to love on Renise. Alan Dietrich was now providing leadership at the OTV. Moise Vaval champions GO in Haiti. The job of caring for Renise ; getting her back to the OTV; and ensuring the baby would be in loving hands fell to the three of them. With determination and hoping for a miracle, they went back to UNICEF to explain the story and get the required paperwork.

At the front desk, the UNICEF worker was bewildered by the details: 13-year-old, restavek, Stenner, very little documentation, new-born baby, hospital. Her head spun, and her blank stare was discouraging. Just then a lady comes out from a back room; she held out her

arm to show hairs standing straight up; we didn't recognize her, but Renise would have – it was Carol.

Carol - the lady who had found Renise crying in Bon Repos two days after the quake.

Carol – the lady who had taken Renise into her home and then to UNICEF.

Carol - the one person in Haiti who could verify that the story we were telling was true was the one person who was filling the UNICEF role who needed to believe us. Please read that again and pause to appreciate the miracle. Words fall short. God is amazing! Oh, Lord, we believe! Forgive us for our unbelief. Beth, Moise, and Alan left that afternoon with the needed paperwork.

There's so much more to share. Like Beth's three days at the hospital with Renise after she had her baby. They talked for hours. They talked about birthdays. Renise decided, since she didn't know her own birthday, that she wanted to share Momma Fox's. They talked about school. Renise wants to be a doctor. They talked about a local Haitian couple who wanted to adopt Renise's baby. Those were hard talks, and in the end, the Haitian government decided adoption was not going to happen anyway, at least not now. But hard talks are okay when they are with someone you love and someone you know loves you. When Beth and Renise were finished talking, they would draw pictures, or go for a walk like when they first met - only a little different now, or take a nap, or just be together as they love to be. No, it's never too late....not with God in charge.

I'd love to hear from Kepsy, Beth's translator for three days at the hospital. What did he think about the love between Renise and Mamma Fox? He recognized his language skills were necessary for the words, but not for the relationship. His bilingual gifts gave him a front row seat to one of life's most powerful stories of transformation....a story he'll never forget.

If Renise were here, maybe she'd tell you about the coming-home party her *GO Project* brothers and sisters had for her at the OTV. She'd smile as she tells you about how they cheered and jumped up and down when she got out of the car. Maybe she'd be a bit embarrassed to tell you that she loved being the center of attention, and how the party dragged on as she made each child come to her individually so that she could personally give them a piece of candy. And, maybe like some of our teenage kids, she wouldn't be interested in telling you the story right then. Maybe she'd be more interested in hanging out with her friends or listening to music, but if Momma Fox was there, Renise would be there as well. They share a special love; the kind that only comes from the Hand of God as He knits two hearts together.

I'd love tell you about the Urban family, who e-mailed us after they watched the *60 Minutes'* program, *Lost Children in Haiti*, which featured Renise's story. For them, this was more than a TV show. It was a divine appointment. God used the bold work of CBS-producer, Solly Granatstein, from New York to touch this family of seven in Oklahoma who reached out in love to a thirteen-year-old orphan in Haiti.

There is much more I can't share, because it hasn't happened yet. For instance, today, Renise goes to school for the first time in a long time. It may even be her first day in a "real classroom." It definitely won't be her last. Her story is alive and real, and it is only a small fraction of this big story. Renise matters. Her baby, Kimberly, matters. Renises and Kimberlies all over the world matter to God, and He is raising up His Church to care for His kids! In the process He is purifying His church. Blessings always flow two ways. His story is full of wonder and only He can write it. Only the Lord gives beauty for ashes, and it's not difficult for Him. He does it all the time. Here's the wonderful secret: we get to be a part of His life-transforming work.



First Day of School (Renise is in the white hat).

"Behold, I am making all things new..." – God (Rev. 21:5)