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August 2020

Dear friends,

Words cannot do justice to her life and work. Nevertheless, we want to share a few of our sentiments with you who have enabled H.O.P.E. to become this powerful force for a better world. Sharing our thoughts with you--the H.O.P.E. network--keeps her near and allows us to continue her work.

Rose-Marie was an accomplished anthropologist, she excelled at the art of observation and was exceptionally sensitive to the adverse effects of cultural hubris and imperialism. Her field notes and observations are a treasure trove of stories, insight, and wisdom. People like Paul Farmer, who has attained celebrity status in global health circles, sought out Rose-Marie and respected her opinion. Her dissertation, which she finished while raising four children, is a seminal work commonly cited by scholars studying Haiti and Haitian culture.

Rose-Marie taught us about Haitian culture and history, and taught us how to avoid taking actions that would be disruptive and harmful despite good intentions. As perhaps some of you experienced, many of our initial ideas were confronted with a firm but loving, "no," from Rose-Marie. In truth, her "no's" reflected a deeper set of positive principles, and a framework we all learned to employ over time. In this way, she taught us the difference between charity and development work. Through her, we learned first-hand how development work done well lifts up, celebrates and emboldens local knowledge and capacity.

The vehicle through which Rose-Marie sought to integrate her interests, passions, and expertise was Haiti Outreach Pwoje Espwa. H.O.P.E was Rose-Marie's fifth child. She loved Borgne and the people of the commune, and she loved "working in the field," as she would say. She relished the time spent riding rough roads and hiking the mountains to mobile clinics and to meetings with community leaders. She cherished her conversations with community leaders and gladly acknowledged how much she learned from hours of spirited debate and discussion with them. Borgne was her home away from home, the place where she found people who spoke the kind of fierce and honest truth that she appreciated and practiced. In turn, she was endeared and beloved by the community.

Spending a day in Borgne with Rose-Marie offered a lifetime of thoughts to ponder—sprinkled with humor, intelligence, and wisdom. We know of no one who enjoyed a good conversation more than Rose-Marie. She was electrified by ideas and the discussion of ideas—especially if they related to Borgne and H.O.P.E.’s work there. Many of H.O.P.E.’s most effective projects were inspired by spirited discussion among Rose-Marie, Dr. Thony Voltaire, Marc Lamore, and Mike Shields. The birth of Alyans Sante Borgne (ASB)—the partnership between H.O.P.E and the Ministry of Health that created the health system—was a product of one such discussion. As Mike Shields, board member and longtime friend, describes it:

“One of our most memorable moments, and one that we laughed about shortly before she died in hospice, led to the formation of ASB/Borgne Health Alliance in 2006. We were sitting on a concrete ledge in an unfinished building overlooking the Caribbean Sea (to get a bit of relief from the oppressive heat and the noise of the marketplace below). Together we started basically dreaming out loud about forming a new health model for Borgne. This was the seminal moment for what is now one of the best rural health initiatives in the north of Haiti. I feel so privileged that she allowed me to stand in her shadow and contribute in ways that she felt complemented her own capabilities. And, then, we brought the dream to fruition.”

Rose-Marie was exceptionally capable of seeing a person’s fundamental goodness and spirit, and she spoke often about what she could observe in a person’s face or in their eyes. She loved telling the story of when she and Mike first met Thony Voltaire, whom she adored. As she told the story, when Rose-Marie and Mike were interviewing Dr. Thony to be Medical Director of ASB, they asked him to introduce himself. He started by saying, “I was born on the side of the road...”. Those nine words were about all Rose-Marie needed to hear. She knew she had found the right person for the job—a person who knew first-hand what it meant to quite literally survive being born on the side of the road. She knew that as a life-long resident of Borgne, Thony would be committed to the community he loved. Thony and Rose-Marie were a force of nature together. They spoke almost every day. Sometimes they drove each other crazy, but they always walked a path of mutual respect and sincere love for each other and for the work of H.O.P.E. We are so fortunate to have Thony as our Medical Director and grateful to Rose-Marie for having the vision not only to hire him, but also to walk side by side with him as he radically improved the capacity for community health in northern Haiti.

Rose-Marie had a way of bringing out the best in people. If we doubted our abilities she would gently remind us of our responsibility to make a positive change in ways we were best able. She met people where they were and helped them find their place in the H.O.P.E. story. So many people have found themselves connecting with Borgne through Rose-Marie. She advocated, cajoled, charmed, and scolded anyone she could think of into doing good work. Rose-Marie truly appreciated everyone who wanted to make a difference. She did not suffer fools but neither did she deride nor criticize anyone who tried to help. She elevated everyone to be a little bit better and to reach a bit deeper inside themselves to shake off whatever blinders held them—us—back.

In the earliest days of the cholera outbreak we met with a group from Doctors Without Borders (MSF), who had done exceptional work to address the immediate critical needs of the commune as it struggled with the shock and tragedy of the disease. MSF had a very specific and important mission related to emergency response, and it was not planning to stay beyond its short-term mandate. Rose-Marie made it clear that this approach would not be acceptable. “You are better than this,” she said as she described the need for MSF to plan for an ongoing and sustained response to cholera in Borgne. The look on the face of the local MSF Director was priceless—“Who is this woman?”—as she accepted Rose-Marie’s point and began making arrangements for us to assume operational responsibility for cholera treatment and community outreach once MSF left. Rose-Marie did not allow people to give up, or to quit.

We, like many of you, are heartbroken by the loss of this caring and inspiring woman. Yet our commitment to H.O.P.E is as strong as ever. In her typical manner, Rose-Marie let us know in no uncertain terms that she expected the work of H.O.P.E. to continue, and she expected us to carry on where she left off, carrying the mission ever forward. Along the way of H.O.P.E.’s journey through earthquakes, cholera and other challenges, many of you have walked with us. In honoring Rose-Marie’s life, vision, and legacy, we ask that you join us in walking these next important steps, embracing our commitment to continue the work of our dear friend and leader, the most extraordinary woman we have known.

Rose-Marie was no doubt one of the most extraordinary women many of you have known, as she had immeasurable impacts in the world around her, and the people she knew, through H.O.P.E. and otherwise. Many people have expressed their desire to honor or pay tribute to Rose-Marie in some way. Though we are unable at this time to meet and share sympathies and sentiments in person, we invite you to share with us any stories, photos, or other messages and memories about Rose-Marie. We are launching a new website in the very near future, where we plan to post and share your messages, memories and photos, so that we can honor Rose-Marie together as a community.

In great sympathy and appreciation,

Jim Myers and Mike Shields,

longtime friends of Rose-Marie and H.O.P.E. Board Members

(on behalf of the H.O.P.E. Board of Directors and Staff)