

Text for the Speech given by
Dr. Peter Wampler on January 12 at Chez Olga's

Today marks the anniversary of a tragic event that brought Haiti and its people into the hearts and minds of many. The dream for a scholarship fund like the one we are announcing today has been around long before the earthquake of January 12, 2010, and even long before Mark Schaub and I began discussing it several years ago. It resides in the hopes, dreams, and aspirations of young Haitians. It is my hope that it will persist well into the future and play a part in restoring Haiti to its status as the "Jewel of the Antilles".

The Empowering Haiti through Education Fund would not have been possible without the help of many people who have shared the vision of helping Haiti through education and opportunity. I will not try to name them all but I want to especially thank Mark Schaub and Padnos International Center; Rays of Hope for Haiti and Doug Porritt, and the University Development Office for helping us make this happen in time for today's anniversary remembrance.

The sad truth is that the earthquake last year joined a long line of natural and human induced disasters in Haiti. When I travelled to Haiti for the first time in 2007, I expected to find a beaten, hopeless, people struggling to survive. That is not what I found. Instead, I found a proud, hopeful people with ambition and ability to survive in an environment which would lead many of us to despair. I saw in the faces of young Haitians the same spark of hope and ambition that exists in the eyes of many of the students at Grand Valley State University.

When I returned to Haiti in 2008 to research water quality with GVSU Summer Scholar Andrew Sisson, my view of Haitians was stretched further as young Haitian high school students followed us through town hoping to practice their English with us as we walked. Experiences like these and looking into the faces of promising young Haitians like Jean-Rony, Fanya, Obenis, and many others convinced me that I had to do something.

I have spent many hours since leaving Haiti, thinking about how to help Haiti find long-term solutions. Many of us believe education is part of the answer. Our vision is to provide scholarships at GVSU so that promising young Haitians can come to GVSU for an advanced degree. My dream would be that GVSU will become an educational "hub" for hopeful Haitian high school graduates just as it is for hopeful students from around Michigan and the region.

We take it for granted in the United States that we can spend some of our time after the sun goes down reading, listening to the radio, or watching television. None of these luxuries are available to rural Haitians. After dark, they are limited to what they can accomplish in complete darkness. We need scholarships, like the one announced today, to bring promising Haitian students to U.S. schools for education, and to support universities already in Haiti.

The target students for this scholarship are economically disadvantaged students who demonstrate excellence, preparation, and promise. Scholarship recipients will be expected to return to Haiti and teach for 3-4 years to help teach the next generation of gifted students and leaders. As part of my sabbatical during the 2010-2011 academic year, I will be spending a month in Haiti, collaborating with researchers at Quisqueya University in Port au Prince. While there, I hope to meet with prospective students and visit some of the high schools we have identified as eligible.

In Creole capab means "can" or "can do". I firmly believe that "Haiti capab." Haitians can solve their problems, and the people of Haiti are capable of great things. What they need is to be empowered to achieve their potential through education. There is a tree that grows in Haiti called the Mapou Tree. This tree is huge and is one of the few large trees commonly seen in Haiti today. What we are planting here today is a seed, and my hope is that someday the lives impacted and the benefits to Haiti will tower like a Mapou tree helping Haiti to restore their land.

Thank you for coming today. We appreciate your generous support and if you have any questions I would be happy to try to answer them.

