

# SALUTARY ANGELS/LES ANGES BIENFAISANTS

By Annie Burns-Pieper



*Pregnant Haitian Woman.*

Before leaving Haiti in 1977, Marie-Hélène Beauboeuf saw something that would stick with her for the rest of her life, a merchant woman giving birth alone on the side of the road, cutting her own umbilical chord with a rock and walking away with her new infant as if it were an everyday occurrence.

The problems with maternal health in 2009, she says, are the same as they were when she left the country in the seventies, if not heightened by the political and economic situation in the country. The problem, she says, is access. In Haiti, a mountainous country, many expecting mothers in remote and rural areas have little or no way to reach health clinics or trained doctors.

In the face of political instability and natural disasters, Haiti has remained the poorest country in the western hemisphere and one of the poorest in the world. Currently 670 women die per 100,000 successful births in the country, a figure twice as high as Guatemala's, the country with the second worst rate in the region, and twenty times higher than the Canadian rate.

Despite numerous NGOs working in the Haiti, many in the field of health and maternal health, Marie-Hélène explains that maternal mortality rates have increased over the years. "People come in to help with these problems but they are not involved with the communities they are working with, solutions need to be bottom up and not top down".

Throughout her time working as a French immersion teacher and beginning a law degree, Marie-Hélène continued to think of the situation of women in Haiti and in 2001 enrolled at Saint Mary's University for a Masters program in International Development. She did her graduate research on the situation of maternal health in Haiti and used this research to start her organization Salutory Angels/ Les Anges Bienfaissants.

In 2005 the organization became a registered non-profit. Since its inception it has been working to develop a participatory, bottom up, community-oriented strategy to address the maternal health needs of the women in Haiti. Marie-Hélène, as the founder and primary staff person of her organization, recognizes the wealth of knowledge that Haitian communities have about their own needs and plans for her work to always include these perspectives. Through the project planning process Salutory Angels has been conducting research in Haiti and working with local health agents and traditional birth attendants to develop a community based strategy to lower maternal mortality.

After receiving media attention through a feature story in the National Post, Ms Beauboeuf was invited to be a guest speaker at an annual clinical meeting of the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada that took place June 17 at the World Trade Centre in Halifax, an opportunity which has allowed her to propel her organization's mission onto a national stage

At present, Salutory Angels is waiting for funds to begin its pilot project in Commune of Léogane, situated 30 km west of the capital Port-au-Prince. The project will require a million dollars to purchase an all-terrain mobile clinic, buy lab equipment, pay doctors and local staff people. The mobile clinic will provide free prenatal and postnatal care services delivered to the doorsteps of pregnant women, free blood and urine testing for detection of HIV/AIDS, malaria, diabetes, albumin, anaemia and other health ailments, a referral system for pregnant women diagnosed with health ailments, the distribution of iron tablets, distribution of birthing kits to traditional birth attendants (TBAs) for safe and sanitary delivery. The mobile clinic will also deliver educational information to mothers and TBAs about the importance of seeking prenatal care, the importance of safe delivery, safe sex, and proper nutrition.



*Mobile Clinic*



*Marie-Hélène with the director of Hôpital Sainte Croix and with the doctor and nurses of the Community Health Center of Darbonne.*

Marie-Hélène, who works from her home office in Halifax, Nova Scotia is dedicated to her goal of reducing maternal mortality in her native Haiti. "Giving to Haiti is a true act of charity" says Beauboeuf. The principle obstacle at this point is funding. If you are interested in donating funds or time, the organization is seeking volunteers, board members and monetary donations to begin the implementation of its pilot project in the Commune of Léogane within the next year.