

HAITI Saving nine lives

Passaic church helps orphanage make a difference

Herald News reporter Samantha Henry traveled to Haiti for this article. Tomorrow, she reports on the exodus of the educated class from the impoverished island nation.

By **SAMANTHA HENRY**
Herald News

BEUDET — Marie-Carm and her little sister Christiana arrived at the OASIS orphanage near the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince one year ago with their bodies bloated from malnutrition, their hair the color and texture

of straw, and every inch of their skin covered with lesions and open sores.

They had been brought there by their mother as a last resort, after her two other children had died of starvation. Confronted with the reality many poor Haitians face, she had to give up her remaining children in order to save their lives.

After a year of living at the orphanage, Marie-Carm, now 6, and Christiana, 4, are healthy, well-fed and receiving an education for the first time in their lives.

They are nurtured by a lifeline that extends from their small Haitian village all the way to Passaic, where Haitian-born Luceanna Moore, her sister Marie Charles, and the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church sup-

HOW TO HELP

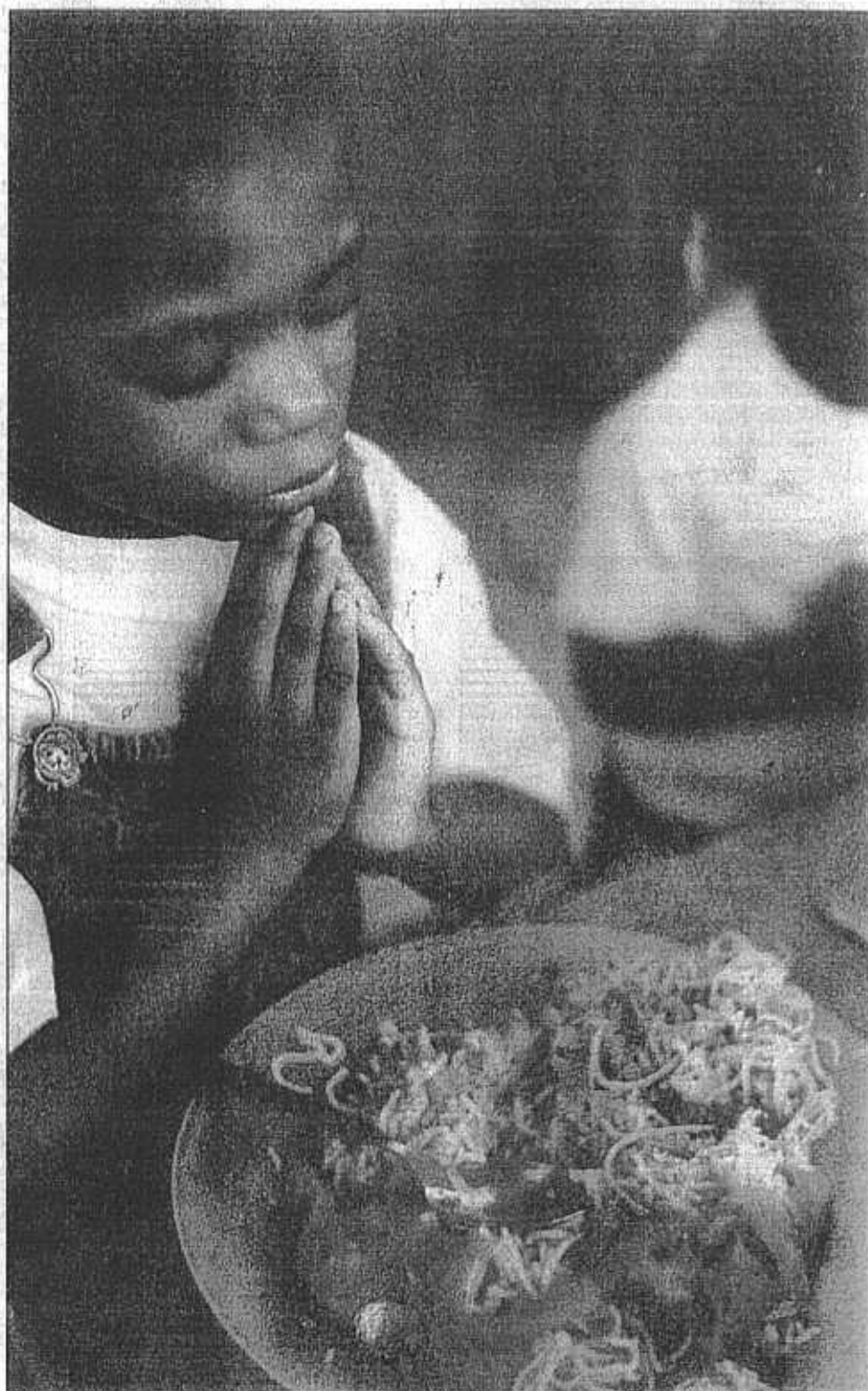
For more information on the OASIS orphanage in Beudet, Haiti, contact:

Luceanna Moore
at (908) 298-9272

The Rev. Linda Ellerbe at the Bethel AME Church in Passaic at (973) 569-7162

Donations can also be sent to:

OASIS, Mount Zion AME Church
54-56 Church St.
Millburn, N.J. 07041



SAMANTHA HENRY/Herald News

Four-year-old Christiana Jerome says grace before a meal at the OASIS orphanage in Beudet, Haiti. The Passaic Bethel AME Church supports the facility.

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Haiti: Orphanage sponsored by nation's suffering

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port the orphanage and the nine children who live there.

"If you had seen these kids the way we had seen them a year ago, you would see the miracle that is in the process," said Charles on a visit to the orphanage in June.

Of the eight girls — ages 2 to 6 — and one 18-month-old boy who live in the orphanage, only three of the children have at least one parent who is still alive. The rest were orphaned young or given up by relatives unable to care for them in a nation with no functioning social services or foster-care system.

Five-year-old Caroline Pierre, whose mother died giving birth to her, was brought to OASIS by an elderly relative who had subjected her to constant beatings before abandoning her altogether. When talking about her own life, Caroline's voice drops to a dry-throated whisper. She is more comfortable speaking for her doll.

"My baby never cries," she said, patting her doll's head. "because I never beat her."

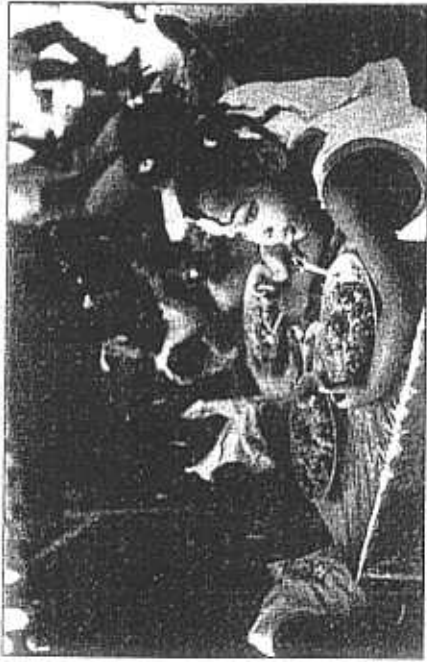
Pierre, like the other children, was so sick a year ago that the orphanage doctor, Michaëlle Ulysse, who had been contracted to come only once a week, ended up working every day.

"They would have been dead by now, they wouldn't have reached 10 or 11 years old," she said, listing the ailments the children arrived with: tuberculosis, dehydration, severe malnutrition, bronchitis, parasites and respiratory problems.

Countless other children had to be turned away from the orphanage, which only had space and funding to support nine kids. Others were too sick to be saved.

Moore, speaking from her home in Roselle, said the selection process was agonizing.

"The hardest part by far was picking which children to take and turning others away, because the fact of the matter is,



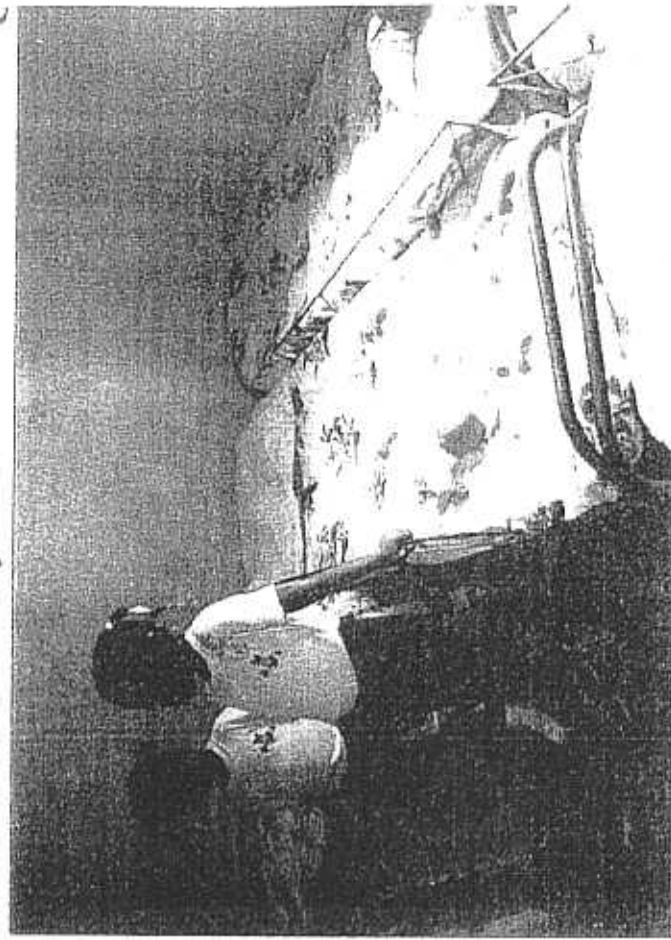
Haitian orphans eat at the OASIS (Our Attempt to Save Innocent Souls) orphanage, supported by the Passaic Bethel AME Church.

they all needed help. It was so hard, just when you thought you'd heard the worst story, someone would come in with a worse one."

Haiti, which shares the Caribbean island of Hispaniola with the Dominican Republic, is the poorest country in the Western world. Eighty percent of its people live in abject poverty, and thousands of refugees — many moving to the United States — have fled the decades of economic devastation, violence, corruption and foreign interventions that have contributed to the near total collapse of the country's government, economy and social structure.

U.S. troops were deployed there in February during a rebellion that forced Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide into exile. An interim government is running the country with support from a U.N. peacekeeping force.

Moore and members of the Bethel AME Church traveled to Haiti in 2003 and said they were astounded by the extent of the suffering they witnessed, especially among children. Working with the OASIS (Our Attempt to Save Innocent Souls) project, a religious-based volunteer group



Photos by SAMANTHA HENRY/Herald Co. The nine children who currently live there receive three meals a day, clothing, health care, schooling and religious education.

Michaelle Antoine, who teaches at the school where the OASIS children take classes, said activities often associated with a normal childhood, such as playtime, are an unaffordable luxury for the majority of Haiti's children.

"There's a difference with the orphans because they receive more than the other kids. They receive more food, clothes and affection. The other kids are very poor and don't get any of this," she said.

Antoine said her other students must work at home cooking, doing laundry or working outside jobs to help support their families. The OASIS children, she said, do better in school, have better grades and are at-

lowed to be "just regular kids."

The staff and supporters of the OASIS project would like to eventually arrange for the children to be adopted in the United States, but for the time being they are trying to raise money to be able to accommodate three more children at the orphanage by September, and eventually build a larger facility, according to the Rev. Linda Ellerbe of the Bethel AME church in Passaic.

"I know we need to do more; I know that if we built facilities across Haiti with the capacity for 5,000 or 50,000 orphans, we could find them," Ellerbe said.

"Some countries are so big and the need is so great you're like the little boy with his finger in the dyke, but Haiti is a small enough country that we can make a tremendous impact," she said.

For now, the nine children of the OASIS orphanage include:

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