

## The Pen ak Pwason Food Program for the Elderly and Disabled in Borgne, Haiti

Link for Paypal donations: [DONATE](#)

Pen ak Pwason  
PO Box 16760  
Rochester, NY 14612-9998

### Overview:

The **Pen ak Pwason** (Bread and Fish) Food Program for the Elderly and Disabled has been serving up love in Borgne, Haiti since 2008. Our director and cooks, Somane, Marivierge, and Marceline purchase locally grown food, cook and serve it four days a week despite political chaos in Haiti, desperate need at the door, rampant inflation, and danger to their personal safety. They do this as their gift of love to their community.



*Marceline, Marivierge and Somame preparing breadfruit.*



*From the early days before we had a building or tables...when we served in Somane's backyard.*



*Our guest Guerre enjoyed rice and beans.*

Purchasing local food means that all the money sent goes to work at least twice in the community, once to purchase locally grown rice, yams, breadfruit, plantains, squash, tomatoes, greens, meat, etc. from farmers and then once again when those farmers use it to provide for their families' health care, education and basic needs. Pen ak Pwason also provides laundry soap.



Local root veggies and plantains.



*Chayote squash is called “militan” in Kreyol.*



*A donation of okra from our friend Isnido Elvariste and his community farm.*

But, most importantly, Pen ak Pwason provides a sense of community for those who have been left behind, pushed aside, and forced to beg in the streets. The larger community of Borgne is proud and grateful that Pen ak Pwason has been active in the community for so long. They often refer travelers, released prisoners, and new arrivals over to get some leftovers after our regular guests are served.





*The group assembled for prayer before Christmas dinner.*



*Sharing a meal of soup jimou (squash soup) during one of my visits.*





*Occius Valcy plays folk songs on the guitar for a sing along.*

## **A more extensive history...up to 2018**

### **Pen ak Pwason Food Program for the Elderly and Disabled in Borgne, Haiti—Our History**

by Sarah Brownell

Imagine that you are getting older and no longer able to work. Maybe you've developed some disabilities due to all the hard work you've done during your lifetime. Now imagine that you are hungry. You have no pension. There is no social security. There are no soup kitchens. Your children have died or moved away. Whom do you depend on? The church gives out some rice randomly when they have a donation, enough to last a few meals—but to cook it you need charcoal or wood, a pot, and ideally some oil and salt. So mostly you must depend on the kindness of your neighbors for sustenance. You beg in the market. You hope a visitor will bestow a gift upon you. Unfortunately, your neighbors are also quite poor. Most families in rural Haiti subsist on less than 1 or 2 dollars a day and are highly vulnerable to any setback such as a health issue, a natural disaster or a robbery.

There are perhaps a few hundred people in the Commune of Borgne in such a state, wandering the edges of the market asking for spare change or visiting neighbors they know to be generous at supper time. Guerre was one of the people who visited my husband and I when we lived in Borgne. She usually came at breakfast since she was known to go to bed with the sun, long before we cooked our dinner. We saved dinner leftovers for her and served her coffee and bread with peanut butter. It used to take me an hour to make coffee on the charcoal stove, so this was as good a breakfast as I could muster. Also, Guerre preferred it. She was a bit particular. She wouldn't eat anything else until she had her coffee and bread. She also never wore shoes no matter how many pairs of sandals we purchased for her. She always passed them on to her children and grandchildren. Yes, Guerre had a family in town, but they were so poor themselves that all they could offer Guerre was a buggy palm mat on the floor. They were not always good to her. We once gave her a thick foam sleeping mat that they took for themselves and they sometimes took her money or food. Although Guerre frequently annoyed us by wandering into our house before we woke and softly calling us to wake up from outside the bedroom door, she also had

much to offer. She was a masseuse and came with herbs to rub on any aches and pains we were suffering. She fixed my husband Kevin's bad ankle. She danced and sang. And when she held you in an embrace and looked directly at you, her eyes held such loving kindness that you'd swear you were looking into the eyes of God.



***Myself and Guerre around 2012...***



***Guerre stopping by for breakfast.***

In March 2008, there was an un-natural disaster. Guerre and the other elderly and disabled people of Borgne, along with all poor Haitians and the poor of many countries across the world, experienced a rapid rise in food prices. Within a month, the price of rice had more than doubled, and corn and wheat prices were skyrocketing. The Food and Agricultural Organization called it a “Food Price Crisis”. “There was enough food to feed the world in 2008,” they said, “but the poor could no longer afford it.” This meant that all the families who had been giving a little to help their neighbors now could barely feed their own families. There were riots and people ate dirt cookies to ease hunger pains. The Prime Minister lost his job. Someone had to take the blame despite the fact that the causes of the crisis were more directly associated with the actions of the “Developed World” such as droughts related to global climate change, US pension funds switching investments from the crashing stock market into the commodities market, and the US decision to grow corn to make ethanol to fuel cars rather than feed people.

By October of that year, my husband Kevin took action. He had previously raised funds through St. Joseph’s House of Hospitality, a Catholic Worker Community, shelter and soup kitchen in Rochester, NY where we had been live-in volunteer Workers before moving to Haiti, to fix up the “Poor House” in Borgne. The Poor House was a concrete building owned by the Catholic Church with small door-less rooms that had fallen into disrepair. It was home to those with no family and nowhere else to go. In 2006, we had successfully mobilized local volunteer masons, carpenters, members of my Sant Teknoloji Bwase Lide (Brainstorming Technology Center) and the Scouts to help replace the roof, fix the retaining wall and porch, and clean out the debris. To address the food crisis, Kevin worked with St. Joseph’s House again to develop a program to support the most vulnerable people in Borgne. Initially we fed 25 people twice a week. Then we expanded to 50 guests, and then, two years ago, to 100, covering a large portion of the need. The project became known as The Pen ak Pwason (Bread and Fish) program for the elderly and disabled. One thing that is different about Pen ak Pwason from many other food programs is that we purchase local food. Imported rice and corn are cheaper than locally grown varieties, but if we bought the imported rice, we would continue to drive local farmers out of business. Our per meal costs are higher when we buy local (about \$2), but the money goes to work at least two times in the community—once to feed people, and another time to support a farmer’s family with their needs for education, health care and other items. We only buy imported items if we can’t find a local version.



***Our original group of 25 guests.***





***Root veggies and plantains ready to be prepared for the meal.***



***Haitian rice with a seafood and vegetable stew called “legim” ready to be served.***

Since the beginning we have had an amazing director, Somane Agustama. Somane had also been a supporter of Guerre, sharing her dinner each day after our breakfast. Somane continues to direct the spirit of the program and does all of the planning and purchasing of local food which requires some diligence, searching and negotiating. She also helps our cooks Marceline and Marivierge with the cooking. Each guest gets more food than they can eat in a sitting, and they all come with containers to take leftovers home. Somane often tells me stories of how new participants start sweating profusely

when they begin eating, because it has been so long since they have eaten a real and full meal. The program provides other things besides food. Laundry soap is given out monthly and clothing donations sporadically when we have them. Also, it provides a community, a sense of belonging, for those who have been pushed aside by society because they are no longer economically valuable. Somane, Marceline, and Marivierge bring food to those who are homebound; they visit the sick; they attend the guests' funerals and the guests call them "mother".



***From left, Marceline, Marivierge and Somane preparing breadfruit for a meal.***

The larger community of Borgne also seems to recognize the program as an asset. Many people have pulled me aside to say they felt ashamed that they were not able to, as a community, do something for the very poor, and they are heartened by the work of Pen ak Pwason. Last Christmas, one of Borgne's diaspora who came home to visit from Miami gave each of the guests 200 gourdes for Christmas and sent along a box of bathing soap to distribute. One of my students, Shwe Sin Win, who had visited the program a few years ago sent money to get a cake for Father's Day and Mother's Day. These seemingly little acts are huge things for those who have not bathed with soap meant for the body in years and for those who have not eaten cake in recent memory. We always make sure to celebrate New Year's Day and Haitian Independence Day with the traditional Soup Jimou—squash soup. A few years ago we provided t-shirts. Uniforms are very popular in Haiti and most groups have, at very least, matching t-shirts. It is important to be a valued part of something...to be part of a tradition, part of a country, part of a community.



***Our t-shirts from 2014, a great source of pride for our guests.***



***Marivierge stirring soup jimou on our charcoal stove.***

Samantha Huselstein, a graduate from the Mechanical Engineering program at the Rochester Institute of Technology, spent the summer in Borgne as part of her work with St. Joseph's House of Hospitality. Along with Somane's son Jamessy Augustama (also a natural engineer) she helped get a tap from the public water supply installed. The public water is rather unpredictable, so they built a water storage system to guarantee supply. They also worked on other projects related to food preservation and sanitation. Finally, they developed a proposal to switch from our charcoal based cook stove (which has pretty much given up as of this writing) to a propane based stove. Switching would be better for the environment—less trees downed to make charcoal in an already deforested country. It would be better for the health of our cooks—less smoke inhalation, eye irritation, and risk of burns. And it would be better from an economic standpoint—the shortage of trees has made charcoal quite expensive. Despite the higher cost of a propane stove, within a year the program will be saving money.





***Sam on left and Jameesy on right standing in front of a food dryer with a local woman's group interested in reducing wasted tree crops by making and selling dried fruit and breadfruit flour.***



***A selfie from my visit in June 2018.***

Donation link:

[https://www.paypal.com/donate/?hosted\\_button\\_id=725GE347HMHKY](https://www.paypal.com/donate/?hosted_button_id=725GE347HMHKY)

Mailing address:

Pen ak Pwason

PO Box 16760

Rochester, NY 14612-9998

