



Seeing Signs

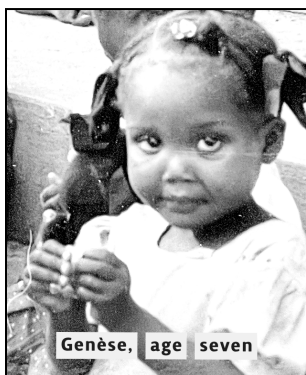
By David Diggs

“You should have seen the signs,” I kept telling myself over and over. “You should have seen the signs!”

I was riding in the back of a truck with the lifeless body of a precious eight-year-old girl at my feet.

I distinctly remember meeting this girl a year earlier, just a couple of months after I’d moved to Haiti. I

was at her school in a mountain town called Trouin. We were taking pictures of students for the child sponsorship program I’d just started managing. I was captivated by her unusual name,



Genèse – which means Genesis in English – and by her poise and beatific visage. Most other kids were giddy or goofy or terribly shy as they sat for their photo. Genèse was remarkably composed. And while her growth was clearly stunted like many other students, she was not skinny. She was chubby, like a little cherub.

I returned to the school every month or so and got to know Genèse and the other sponsored students better as my Haitian Creole improved.

The following school year we placed an American nurse named Judie Adams in the community of Trouin for her Haitian language immersion.

When Judie met Genèse, she saw her very differently. What I had seen as poise, Judie interpreted as lethargy. And the chubbiness I saw was actually edema. Genèse was suffering from both anemia and a severe form of malnutrition

called *kwashiorkor*, in which a lack of protein leads to fluid retention.

Genèse’s mother had died from tuberculosis a couple of years earlier, which left Genèse’s father, a desperately poor man named Olito, responsible for both earning money and preparing meals. With little money or time, Olito depended on the cheapest and most convenient source of calories in Trouin, the starchy white bread that came from the school’s bakery, which was the project of a U.S. church group.

The bakery used cheap, highly refined flour from surplus wheat that the U.S. government donated to (or dumped on) Haiti. The bread was filling, but offered little protein, fiber, iron, or other nutrients. And all over Haiti, this cheap flour was flooding the market and forcing Haitian farmers out of business, even though the millet, corn, and rice they grew was much more nutritious.

Judie immediately set about trying to help Olito understand Genèse’s condition and integrate more protein into her diet. But by this time Genèse had become so malnourished that she was listless and lacked an appetite for the eggs, beans, and greens Judie offered. So, we asked Olito if we could place Genèse in a nutrition center run by the Missionaries of Charity in Port-au-Prince. He reluctantly agreed.

One morning shortly before Christmas, Judie and I traveled to Port-au-Prince to visit Genèse. She seemed happy to see us, and the sisters said she was eating and had more energy. We were very encouraged.

Judie asked Genèse if there was anything she would like. “A little doll, please,” she replied sweetly. So, Judie went looking for a doll while I ran other errands.



When we returned in the afternoon with a doll Judie knew Genèse would love, the sisters greeted us at the gate with heartbreaking news. Genèse had failed to wake up from her nap. We were stunned. The doctor said her little heart had just stopped, which is not uncommon among children recovering from chronic *kwashiorkor*.

There were no phones in Trouin to send word to Olito. We had no choice but to immediately wrap Genèse's body in a sheet, pack her in ice, and take her back to her father.

That three-hour drive gave me plenty of time to think about how my ignorance had led to this little girl's death. If I'd only seen the signs Judie easily recognized, we could have intervened an entire year earlier. I'd come to Haiti to help, but everything I was involved in seemed like a miserable failure.

The schools with all the sponsored children were failing because like all the other schools in Haiti at the time, they were attempting to teach in French, a language that none of the teachers or anyone in these rural communities actually spoke. Students went to school for years and remained illiterate. Haiti's colonial language was still being used to exclude Haiti's masses from power and perpetuate in them a sense of inferiority. And I was just promoting this with my work.

Every effort I saw that was supposed to be helping Haiti was actually making things worse. I was becoming deeply disillusioned and began making plans to leave Haiti.

It's been 33 years since Judie and I delivered this little girl's body into the arms of her heartbroken father. I will never forget her.

But over the past year, I've been thinking a lot about another Genèse – only the second Genèse I've ever known. This Genèse – Genèse Doirin – was born two years after little Genèse died from malnutrition.

Genèse Doirin is someone we regularly introduce to people who participate in the virtual

tours we do for people seeking to learn more about the work of Beyond Borders in Haiti. Genèse Doirin is a mother of three and a survivor of child servitude. Until recently, she was trapped in poverty even more extreme than what Olito experienced. She'd been homeless, traumatized by violence, and unable to feed her children or send them to school.

The name Genèse (Genesis) means beginning, and this Genèse experienced a new beginning when she was selected to participate in our 18-month Family Graduation program.

Today, like more than 95 percent of the families that have participated in this program, Genèse has a home, a growing business, and a plan for the future. She's able to feed her children nutritious meals every day and put them in a good school (where they're quickly becoming literate because they're being taught in their own language). She's giving them the childhood she was denied.

Genèse not only received a new beginning, but she is creating new beginnings for others. She's become a leader who is helping transform her entire community. And her story is not unique. The change she embodies is the norm in communities where Beyond Borders works.

We launched Beyond Borders just four years after little Genèse's death in part because of something I learned from the experience of seeing Judie see signs I missed. All these efforts to help Haiti were failing because they were based on a belief in quick fixes and simple solutions. Judie was able to see what I missed because of her medical training, training that drew on the accumulated expertise of a medical profession that developed from nearly two centuries of clinical trial and error and the persistent rigor of scientific research. No quick fixes.

When we launched Beyond Borders, we understood that just and lasting change could not



be achieved quickly in Haiti. Real progress would take both a determination to recognize and learn from failure and a tenacity rooted in love, respect, and hope.

Christmas is the celebration of a cosmic new beginning, a new genesis rooted in God's persistent love. Even though many in that day were longing for the Messiah, they missed the signs that accompanied Jesus' birth. Only a few, like Simeon and Anna (Luke 2) were sensitive enough to the Spirit to recognize in this child the long-promised savior.

After Genèse's death, I wanted to give up and leave Haiti. I'd lost hope. Then a wise Haitian Episcopal priest named Roger Désir told me that despair is a kind of blindness. "Has God lost hope in you? No? Has God lost hope in Haiti's people? No? Then how dare you? Hope is choosing to believe God... And with God all things are possible." With that, I began to see that even tragedies like the death of Genèse could nurture in us the kind of deeply rooted hope we need to persist long enough to learn, and grow, and make a lasting difference.

Thank you for sharing in the work of Beyond Borders. May the signs of God's abundant love become ever clearer to you and fill you with a renewed and steadfast hope this Christmas and in the new year to come. Merry Christmas!

*Want to see a three-minute
video of Genèse Doirin
telling her story? Point your
phone's camera at this QR
code or go to
beyondborders.net/signs*



BEYOND BORDERS



PO Box 2132, Norristown PA 19404
(610) 277-5045 mail@beyondborders.net