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BY BARA VAIDA | PHO

JAMIE FREISHTAT REME
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and Jamie watched in horror as scenes of destruction flashed across their television screen. About 70 percent of the buildings, including homes, in Port-au-Prince had been reduced to rubble; survivors were walking around dazed and crying. It looked like bombs had been dropped on miles and miles of the city and countryside.

"If we could have jumped through the TV to help, we would have," Jamie says.

The two had met as kids at Robert Frost Middle School in Rockville, but didn't know each other well until they were students at the University of Maryland School of Medicine. After marrying in 1997, they bought a home near their families, who live in Gaithersburg. Rob, a specialist in lung diseases, began a fellowship in emergency medicine at Children's National; Jamie joined a local pediatric practice. During his fellowship, Rob volunteered to teach advanced life-support techniques at hospitals in Egypt and Belarus. Through his work overseas, he understood the need to ration when supplies were low, and he'd dealt with making difficult decisions about which patients should and could be treated with limited resources. "We both, Jamie and I, kind of at the same time just said to each other, we could do something, we could have an impact," he says.

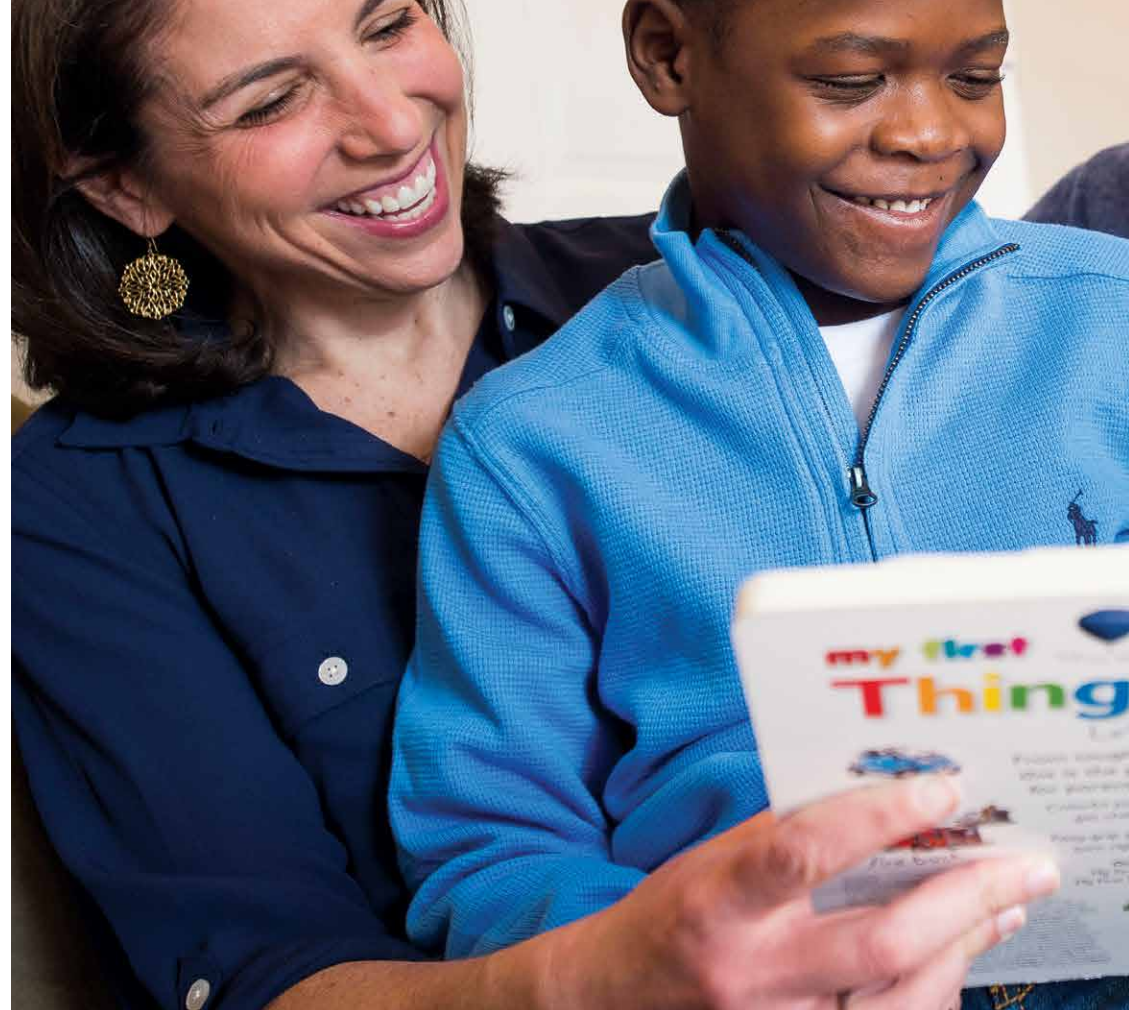
After talking to colleagues and searching online, Rob found The CRUDEM Foundation, a Ludlow, Massachusetts-based nonprofit that funds Hôpital Sacré Coeur, a Catholic hospital in the tiny town of Milot, Haiti. Hundreds of earthquake victims had been sent there from Port-au-Prince. He and Jamie booked an eight-day stay in Haiti, using their own money for plane tickets, and flew into Cap-Haitien, a city on the country's northern coast, in early April 2010. On the way to Milot, their car bounced along unpaved roads and they saw miles of square cement

out doors. There were about 500 patients and 72 beds. Volunteer physicians and nurses slept on military-issue cots on the hospital's grounds.

It rained almost constantly during Rob and Jamie's time at Hôpital Sacré Coeur. Staff and visitors tracked mud into the makeshift pediatric unit where doctors were treating children suffering from severe blood and bone infections. Some patients had to have limbs amputated. Jamie was so absorbed in the work that she didn't have time to get upset. Though the situation was heartbreaking, she and Rob were used to seeing children with serious injuries, so they put their emotions aside to focus on their patients. They knew the young people they were helping would be going back to Port-au-Prince. "It was so hard because we knew we were sending them to a place that was literally rubble," says Jamie. "It wasn't until I left that I cried."

Despite the pain they were witnessing, Rob and Jamie found Haiti inspiring. Villagers cooked pots of rice and beans for strangers. (Haitian hospitals don't provide food for patients; their families are expected to feed them.) School children came to sit with orphans to give them comfort, and sang to patients and visitors. "We just fell in love with the people of Haiti," Rob says. He became friends with one of his translators, who helped him communicate with the young people he was treating—most Haitians speak Creole, though the official language is French. "These are people that have nothing. I mean nothing," Rob says. "They live in a tiny home with dirt floors with 12 or 13 people. They have a hole in their roof. Yet if they had one thing to give, they would give it to you or their neighbor." Rob and Jamie vowed to return.

"After having met the people we met, we knew that somehow, in some way, they were going to be part of our lives,"



says Jamie, now 45. "We were never leaving there for good."

When they got home to Potomac, they found themselves noticing things that hadn't bothered them before, like the way people get annoyed about standing in line for coffee. *What are you complaining about?* Rob would think. They talked to their sons—Nate, then 10, and Max, then 8—about Haiti, and both boys offered to ask friends and relatives to donate to Haitian relief organizations. A family friend who teaches social studies at Cabin John Middle School in

Potomac invited Rob to speak to students about his work, and the teacher later incorporated a project about Haiti into his curriculum and spearheaded a fundraising drive to help build a well for Hôpital Sacré Coeur.

Rob started working on a plan to bolster the hospital's pediatric services. Haiti was in desperate need of skilled pediatric care—the country's main medical school in Port-au-Prince was heavily damaged by the earthquake, and thousands of health care workers were injured or killed. He put out a call to doctors, nurses and



making him thirsty, so the 5-year-old asks Rob for some water.

"You know where to get water," his dad says, nodding his head toward the sink.

Luke looks at Rob quizzically. "You don't get it from the sink," he says.

"You don't?" Rob asks.

"Not at BRESMA," Luke says. BRESMA (Brebis de Saint Michel de L'Attalaye) is the name of the orphanage in Port-au-Prince where Luke spent two years before coming to the U.S. He lived there with about 60 other children who didn't have much to do all day but play with one another and a few toys. His bed was near where the babies slept, and he liked to cuddle and rock them. Sometimes the kids watched videos on television or sat under a tree outside, but there was no room for them to run around and no view of the world beyond the orphanage walls. Luke charmed the staff, who nicknamed him

"El Presidente" because he liked to lead the kids games and give tours to anyone who visited.

"You are right, Luke, you don't want to have water from the sink in BRESMA, but here it is safe, right?" Rob explains. "Here, you have water from the sink every day, right?"

"Yeah," Luke says. "Well, there is one sink here, and then one downstairs and two upstairs. That is a lot of sinks." Then the little boy goes back to laughing with his friend.

More than a year has passed since the Freishtats brought Luke home from Haiti. He spoke hardly any English when he arrived—they communicated with him using Google's Translate app and Jamie's high school French skills—but being around his family and school helped Luke pick up the language quickly. At first, Luke was terrified of the family's chocolate Labrador, Brownie. Dogs

aren't kept as pets in Haiti—they're often dangerous. "[Luke] was clawing up Jamie because he was so deathly afraid," says Rob, 45. But within a day he was petting her. His first few nights home, Luke slept with Rob and Jamie, but then he wanted to sleep in his own room down the hall.

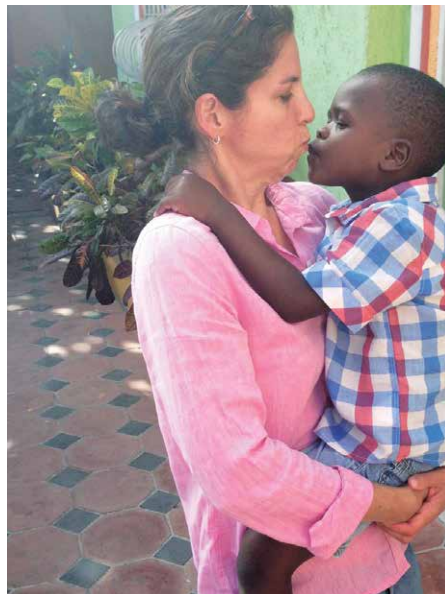
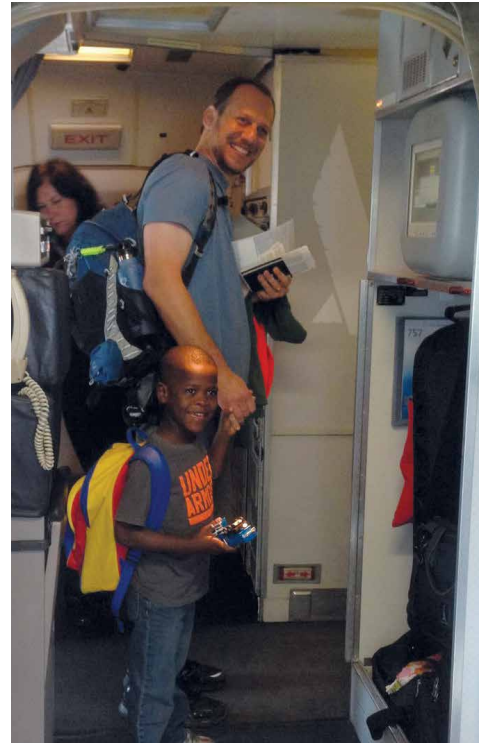
"I have a lot of books," he says with a smile when asked what he likes most about his bedroom. Among his favorites are *Green Eggs and Ham* and *We're Going on a Bear Hunt*, he says, which his parents read to him at night. On his bed is a giant pillow with his name on it.

Luke hasn't asked Rob and Jamie about his biological parents, though he has recently noticed that his skin is brown and theirs is white. They realize that one day they'll have to tell him what happened, that a neighbor or a family member—they aren't sure who it was—brought him to a hospital when he was a toddler, wrote "Louiken Jean, 2 Ans" on

wife the photo that made her heart melt. He and Jamie had talked about adopting a child from Haiti on and off for a few years. They'd realized the saying they heard was true: You don't leave Haiti without wanting to bring every child home with you. But despite returning to the impoverished country as a doctor, Rob had never taken the next step toward adoption. That night, he went to the head of the hospital to ask if adopting Luke was even a possibility, and the man assured him that it was. Rob knew Hôpital Sacré Coeur wouldn't be able to care for Luke for long, and he was worried about where the boy would go next—he didn't want Luke to end up in an orphanage with poor living conditions.

As Rob tried to figure out what to do, Debbie Harvey, who lives in Haymarket, Virginia, and operates a Haitian orphanage, happened to visit the hospital. The two had met at a luncheon in Virginia weeks earlier and talked about their mutual love for Haiti and their concern about the well-being of the children. Rob introduced Harvey to Luke and asked if her orphanage, Kay Anj D'ayiti (Angel House of Haiti), could take Luke temporarily. "The second I saw Luke and Rob together, I knew it was meant to be," Harvey says. "It was like they'd known each other forever. I was going to do anything I could for them."

Slowly, Luke's condition started to improve. He finally started drinking milk. The nurses took a special interest in making sure he was eating, and a hospital nun brought him hard-boiled eggs from her own chickens. After eight days in Haiti, Rob had to get back to his job at Children's National, where



Clockwise from top: When Rob saw Luke for the first time, the toddler was in a hospital bed, malnourished and dehydrated; Jamie (not pictured) and Rob brought Luke home from Haiti in December 2015, about two years after they began the adoption process; Jamie got to know Luke during visits to Haiti and struggled to say goodbye to the boy whenever she had to leave; Nate, Max, Rob and Jamie spent time with Luke at the BRESMA orphanage in Haiti—each time they came to see him, Luke would ask, "This time will I go on the airplane?"

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE FREISHTAT FAMILY



Luke was afraid of the family's dog, Brownie, when he first met her—dogs aren't kept as pets in Haiti—but within a day he was petting her.

he oversees planning and budgets, manages staff, and serves as lead physician of the emergency department, treating patients with everything from viruses to gunshot wounds.

When he got home that March, Rob couldn't stop talking about Luke and showing Jamie, Nate and Max the photos and videos on his phone. The boys, who had learned so much about Haiti through their parents' stories, were excited to meet him. Jamie started looking into how to adopt from Haiti, and a relative gave her the name of an adoption lawyer. Soon she was focusing her energy on Luke, a boy she hadn't met but already felt was hers.

"I wanted to get him to the U.S. and out of Haiti," Jamie says. "I thought because the situation was so dire there, and there are so many children without families, that it wouldn't take too long

to adopt. I knew there'd be paperwork and legal issues, but I thought maybe it would be six to nine months to get him here." She had no idea that it was just the beginning of a long and painful journey.

IN THE CHAOS after the 2010 earthquake, news outlets reported that there were thousands of homeless children wandering the streets of Haiti. Many American families were struck by the images they saw on TV and wanted to help. The administration of President Barack Obama responded by briefly lifting visa requirements for Haitian children who were already in the process of being adopted. In the four months after the earthquake, more than 1,100 children were airlifted to the U.S. before their adoption proceedings had been completed, according to *The New York Times*. Then controversy erupted

take Haitian children out of the country without proper documentation.

Amid all of this, Haiti temporarily halted most international adoptions and moved to change its laws to comply with the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption. The convention aims to reduce child trafficking and ensure that the 95 participating countries follow a set of strict ethical standards.

Before Haiti toughened its laws in 2014, U.S. adoption agencies could directly match prospective parents with children in any Haitian orphanage. Now, in order for a Haitian child to be adopted internationally, that child must be living in one of 70 orphanages that are licensed by Haiti's department of welfare, known as the Institute of Social Well-Being and Research (IBESR), according to Diana Boni, program coordinator for All Blessings International, one of 20 agencies now licensed to conduct Haitian adoptions. Boni helped Jamie and Rob adopt Luke.

Because of the extreme poverty and weak government infrastructure, there are varying estimates of the number of orphans living in the country. According to the Lumos Foundation, a London-based child advocacy organization, about 32,000 children are residing in more than 700 orphanages in Haiti. (Many of those children aren't technically orphans because one parent is still alive.) Of those children, about 5,000 are in IBESR-sanctioned orphanages and can be legally adopted, according to Boni.

Prospective parents can no longer "choose" a child outside of an orphanage, the way Rob and Jamie did. Under the new laws, IBESR decides which child or children a family can adopt, and parents must work through an agency that follows the rules of the Hague convention.

Luke's adoption. They filled out a lengthy application that included detailed information about their finances and health. They gathered written recommendations from family and friends, went through criminal background checks and submitted fingerprints to the FBI. "I had no idea what people who adopt have to go through," Jamie says. "Our house had to be inspected by the fire department. Someone came to measure the room that was going to be Luke's to make sure it is big enough. And through all of this you are thinking it's so ironic, because right then Luke was living in an orphanage with all these kids in a tiny room."

IBESR is hindered by infrastructure problems that slow the adoption



and a small hotel down the street that had a pool and a restaurant, as long as someone from the orphanage went with them. At dinner, Max saw Luke trying to eat butter straight out of the dish because he didn't know he wasn't supposed to. The boy was so surprised and confused by the cold feel of ice cream on his tongue that he said in French, "It's hot, hot, hot!" The 3-year-old scared Jamie when he started to jump into the hotel's tiny pool, not realizing he'd have to swim.

For four days, they slowly got to know each other. Rob's friend from Milot helped translate so they could understand one another, and Jamie used her limited French—she knew words like "cookie" and "bathroom"—to talk to Luke. What

get him. As the family opened the front gate to leave BRESMA, she could hear Luke wailing behind her.

ONCE THE FREISHTATS formally started the Haitian adoption process on Dec. 17, 2013, there was nothing more they could do but wait. From time to time they'd get an email from All Blessings to let them know there had been progress, or to request an additional document.

At holiday gatherings and family parties, Jamie would think about how Luke should be there, too. To cope with the waiting, she and Rob got to know other parents adopting from BRESMA through a private Facebook page. Jamie would call her sister-in-law and her

None," Jamie says. "No phone calls, no FaceTime. Nothing. I would ask families that were going to BRESMA to take pictures and video of Luke for me. Then I would analyze every square inch of that photo. This is your child, but you have no control over anything."

Rob visited Luke four times in 2014, and Jamie joined him on two of those trips. She gave Luke a pillowcase and quilt she'd had made for him—decorated with photos—so he could feel like he was sleeping next to his family every night. Then, on Dec. 17, 2014, one year after the application was filed, Boni called Rob to say, "Congratulations, you are officially matched with Luke. I am assuming you are accepting the match?"

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bringing him home

“I kind of chuckled,” Rob recalls.

When a child is matched with prospective parents in Haiti, those parents spend 15 days with the child for a socialization and bonding period before the adoption can move forward. The Freishtats immediately booked tickets to Haiti and brought Nate, Max and Jamie’s parents with them. Everyone stayed in the guesthouse. A social worker from IBESR came to observe their interactions.

“Children just sort of wandered about, with little in terms of toys or play space,” says Jamie’s father, George Abramowitz, “but Luke was just this happy guy.” After another painful goodbye, the Freishtats went back to waiting.

In 2015, Luke’s paperwork was sent to Haiti’s immigration, state and justice departments, and each took weeks to evaluate it. Boni let Rob know whenever there were problems. In Haiti, most children are born at home and a family member goes to a judge to have a birth certificate recorded by the government. But Luke didn’t have a birth certificate. Harvey, the director of the Kay Anj orphanage, had connections to local government officials who helped create one for him. The document, signed by a judge, declared him an orphan. Rob and Jamie chose to make Luke’s birthdate Sept. 2, 2011, so that he would miss the kindergarten cutoff date and get an extra year of preschool. (In Montgomery County, children who aren’t 5 years old by Sept. 1 start kindergarten the following school year.)

Then there was another delay. Someone at IBESR didn’t like the way the documents had been signed and asked for the judge to re-sign them, but the judge had died. It took about six weeks for All Blessings to convince IBESR that a prosecutor’s signature attesting to the integrity of the documents was good enough. “My child is sitting in that orphanage every day while this is happening,” Jamie says. “And it was just like banging your head against the wall.”

In June, when all the necessary agencies had signed off on Luke’s adoption,

Haiti’s state department ran out of ink and couldn’t print Luke’s passport. “I was beside myself when I heard that,” Rob says. “I was going to go to Staples, buy some ink and deliver it myself. But I was told that wouldn’t work because it was really about people deciding that they didn’t want to work that week.”

Finally, on July 30, 2015, the department printed Luke’s Haitian passport. He was now legally Rob and Jamie’s, but only in Haiti—his adoption also had to be approved in the U.S. Because it had been two years since Rob and Jamie completed their U.S. application, they had to update their paperwork and undergo another criminal background check.

Over the next four months, the Freishtats visited Luke two more times. Each time he saw them, Luke would ask, “This time will I go on the airplane?”

“No, honey, we love you very much, but not this time,” Jamie would say.

“By Thanksgiving that year, I remember just being in despair, thinking when is this going to happen? Will it ever happen?” she says.

Then, on Dec. 3, 2015, Rob got a call from Boni. The adoption had been approved.

A YEAR AFTER BRINGING his son home, Rob is packing for another trip to Haiti. On the floor in the family’s home office are suitcases filled with T-shirts, shorts, dresses, kids clothes, flip-flops and soccer balls that the Freishtats either purchased or received as donations from friends, family and Rob’s colleagues at Children’s National. The clothes are for Rob’s translator friend and the staff at Hôpital Sacré Coeur. Rob is also taking a mobile pediatric critical-care unit, including an ultrasound machine. Nate, who wants to be a doctor like his parents, helped his dad put medications in the bags and has been begging to join him on a trip.

“I bring whatever I can when I go,” Rob says. “This time the hospital was out of AAA batteries, so I’m bringing down a bunch of AAA batteries.”

Rob continues to lead volunteer medical teams in Haiti twice a year, always using his vacation time. Eventually, he says, he and Jamie plan to take Luke there so he can stay connected to the culture. They’re expecting him to have questions about where he was born and how he came to be a part of their family. “We are fortunate in that we live in a diverse community with lots of friends of different backgrounds, so it isn’t unusual to see different colors and faces wherever we are, but it is something, as he becomes a teenager, that is going to be far more of an issue,” Rob says.

Jamie still marvels at the far-reaching impact of the couple’s first trip to Haiti in 2010. At their temple, some of the teenagers who’ve baby-sat Luke during services have told Jamie that they love him so much that they plan to adopt from Haiti. Nate’s school, Sidwell Friends in D.C., arranged a trip to the Kay Anj orphanage in March 2014, and several girls from the Upper School have since gone back with their parents. Max, now an eighth-grader at Cabin John Middle School, joined Nate on the Sidwell trip and became friends with some of the orphans he met there. Now he writes them letters about what’s going on in the U.S., and Harvey brings the letters with her to Kay Anj. “It makes me happy, how this has spread,” Jamie says.

For Luke, everything is different than it was at BRESMA. At his preschool, about a mile from his house, there’s a huge courtyard where kids can ride bikes, jump rope and play hopscotch. Classroom walls are filled with students’ artwork. At the end of a school day in December, he proudly shows his mom the picture he drew of an animal in a cave, and tells her that he learned what hibernation means. He says goodbye to his friends and his teacher, then politely holds the front door for the kids and adults behind him.

“Mom, tomorrow is ninja pizza day, my favorite day,” he says, skipping on his way home. ■

Bara Vaida is a health writer based in Washington, D.C.