

Making do: Resourcefulness and desperation in Haiti

by [David Williamson](#) in the [June 29, 2004](#) issue

To call Fondwa a village is misleading. It has no central point of organization or population density. It is defined by a road that snakes through a valley 40 miles southwest of Port au Prince. Scattered along the road are a Catholic church, a number of Protestant churches, a school and an international guesthouse that also contains the region's sole clinic. From that main road, a network of footpaths connect white wooden houses that dot the valley in every direction.

The houses are the size of a large living room in the States. Haitian families are not small—there are typically seven or eight children in each. When the children marry and have their own children, they may share the parents' house.

Our house in Fondwa is almost as crowded. We share it with two Cuban men, a French woman, a community of nuns (two sisters and five novices) and four Haitian women.

Our biggest problem thus far has been our inability to talk with our neighbors. We'd been told we would be given an "immersion course" when we arrived in Fondwa, and it was exactly that—our teacher didn't speak a word of English. We used our time with him to practice pronunciation, and the rest of the time we huddled over our Creole textbook and made halting attempts at conversation during dinner.

Then we met Wilkens. Six of us were painting small wooden chairs for the preschool classroom when a man in his 20s walked up and asked if there was an extra paintbrush. He asked me what my name was. It took a few seconds before I realized that he had asked in English.

English had been one of his favorite subjects, he explained. He had come to register his younger sisters for school, then saw us working and thought he would help. "One must always work a little to help one's community," he said.

Eager to practice his English, he asked if I could meet with him every week—I could practice Creole and he could practice English. I jumped at the opportunity. And so our friendship began.

In many ways, Wilkens is not a typical Haitian. The fact that he has finished school puts him in a small group. Only half of primary-age children in Haiti go to school. Most can be seen working in the fields, leading animals along the road or just sitting around because their parents cannot afford to buy them books and a uniform. Of the children that do go to school, fewer than one in three will complete sixth grade. In Fondwa this fact is evident in the contrast between the size of the first grade, with over 80 students, and the 11th grade, with 11 students. Many of the older students are over age 20.

Wilkens's family is also atypical. Because there is little business in Fondwa and therefore no job market, it is common for fathers to leave their families and search for work in Port-au-Prince. Wilkens's father owns a large portion of land, however, and is able to stay at home and support his family with food from their own gardens. Other expenses are covered with income his wife makes by selling homemade goods and surplus produce in the market.

In other ways, though, Wilkens is typical. Despite his high school education, for instance, he has little opportunity for advancement. Even if he entered one of the few centers of higher education (a university was begun in Fondwa this past year, but it is difficult for entering students to find a sponsor who can aid with tuition and living expenses), he would probably not find employment. His choices were further limited this year when his father began having heart trouble; Wilkens now shares responsibility for cultivating the family gardens, as well as for arranging the details of his younger siblings' education.

When Wilkens and I began meeting, we had only one book with translations in both Creole and English—the Bible. We began with Philippians, because it is one of my favorite books. When I was a teenager, one of my favorite verses was Philippians 4:13: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." I remember trying out for the soccer team and repeating to myself during conditioning drills: "God will give me strength—I can do this!"

I was surprised to read the Creole rendition of this verse. "In any situation that appears before me, I can *degaje*, thanks to Christ who gives me strength." I had

been expecting to find *fè*, the Creole word for “do” or “accomplish.” *Degaje* has a different meaning. Haitians use it in this way: If you don’t have the skills or materials to do something correctly, you “*degaje*” it—make it work some other way. For instance, if you don’t have the right screws to mount a pencil sharpener to a desk, you can use nails or wire or even duct tape to keep it in place. You “*degaje*” it.

This shift in verbs is crucial. The Haitian understanding is not that with God’s help we can make any dream come true. In this culture, such an interpretation would amount to a lie. Rather, with God’s help, we can expect to *degaje*. We can get by; we can make life work.

And in some ways this is Paul’s message too, if we place his words in their context. He is writing, after all, from prison. He is not telling the Philippians the secret of being successful; he is teaching them the art of survival in any and all circumstances—in poverty and riches, in hunger and plenty.

Degaje-ing is a daily way of life in this environment. We see endless varieties of resourcefulness—in the way people farm on a 45-degree slope using only the simplest of tools, or in the way they make use of household items that people in the States would throw out. Lessons can be learned from watching this art of survival, such as lessons about community. No family can till or harvest its own land. The job is too big, and precious time would be lost. So neighbors join together, going from field to field, banging their machetes, singing ancient songs of fertility and tilling the hard, sloped earth with a handful of picks and shovels.

The lesson spills over to other facets of life. Whenever a house is built, neighbors put in just as much work as the family who will eventually own the house. When the women wash clothes in the river, they share the work among all who gather—without respect to the size of the washloads. What the Haitians lack in infrastructure—electricity, running water, roads, health care—they make up for with their closely knit social structure.

But there are also dangers in this art of survival. One has only to look at the Fondwa landscape, which is a bare wrinkled skin of earth where once there was a tropical forest. Farmers have stripped the forests, sold the wood as charcoal and converted the rest of the land into farmland. Without the trees, the top soil seeps away with the spring rains, and productivity declines. Farmers are forced to surrender more trees in order to clear more land, and a vicious cycle is put in place. Only 5 percent

of the land in Fondwa remains forested—a not-so-hidden part of *degaje* living.

Recently Wilkens and I were translating the sixth chapter of Matthew, which includes the injunction to “consider the lilies of the field.” Wilkens asked, “Do you believe this?” Do I believe that just as God cares for the birds of the air and the flowers of the field, he will care for humans?

“Well, Wilkens,” I stammered, “I don’t think it is as easy as this makes it sound. Clothing and food don’t just drop down from the sky—we still have to work for these things. I think the point is not to worry.”

Wilkens waved me off. I had missed the point. “I know we must work. I mean, do you believe God gives everyone what they need to live?”

I took a moment to look around at the surroundings. We could see almost the entire valley. Across from us, the hill was covered in patchwork fields and terraces, and where the peasants had recently tilled, the soil was a rich, dark umber. We could see the first traces of green pushing up in places, and knew these would become the beans and the corn that people would survive on in the coming year. Off to the left, though, there was nothing but erosion—huge slopes of red earth unrelieved by a single spot of green grass. The water run-off had marked the land with deep valleys and rivulets. I wondered which would prove more powerful in shaping the future of this valley—the carefully arranged terraces or the wild rivulets of erosion.

I could see people on footpaths snaking in between the fields and houses. Men were returning from their fields, their bare feet caked with dirt, their hoes or machetes slung over their tired shoulders. Women were climbing the slopes with backs held straight under huge baskets of freshly washed clothes. Children dressed only in oversized T-shirts were outside playing.

Wilkens was right. It is not a question of work or diligence. And yet his question hung in the hot air and in my heart and mind. Would these people receive all they needed to live? “I’m not sure, Wilkens. What do you believe?”

Wilkens moved his finger to the title the translators had given to the passage: “Place your trust in God.” Wilkens lightly tapped the sentence with his finger, and then raised his head to give me the full force of his gaze. “I believe in this part.”