

New Trier's Haitian link helps save island school

By Tara Malone
TRIBUNE REPORTER

Maurice Bonhomme and Jean Cayemitte grew up in the shadows of St. Joseph School in a seaside Haitian town.

They picked passion fruit from trees in the courtyard and played soccer in the nearby fields. Bonhomme studied at the school his father created.

More than three decades and hundreds of miles later, the childhood friends and fellow security guards at New Trier Township High School hope to salvage the school, which has fallen into disrepair. Ceilings are pockmarked with holes; desks are scarce; and the trees whose fruit the men ate have long since fallen.

"That school is a landmark for us, so we're not going to let it close," Cayemitte said.

The men send money home every few months, which helps cover teacher salaries, about \$80 a month. What's left helps students who cannot afford the \$5 monthly tuition. But to repair the building, the old friends knew they'd need help. They didn't have to look far.

Bonhomme, 54, and Cayemitte, 48, mentioned the idea to New Trier teacher Carolyn Muir. That was all it took.

"For them to reach out to say 'We have a need' was huge," said Muir, who teaches world history. "What they give is so much more than we can understand, living where we live. But if we can help, kids might understand just a bit."

Muir helped convene educators at the school's Northfield freshman campus to talk about St. Joseph, Haiti and whether the North Shore school might be able to offer support.

In August, Muir and a half-dozen teachers traveled with the two men to their hometown of Petit Goave. They toured the school and compared notes with the nine teachers who work there. Then, last month, the New Trier group raised \$9,000



Maurice Bonhomme, left, of Roselle and Jean Cayemitte of Skokie are security guards at the North Shore school. The two men grew up in Haiti. DAVE SHIELDS/PHOTO FOR THE TRIBUNE

in a Haitian cookout to help pay salaries and tuition.

In March, teachers and the two Haitian security guards plan to launch a project to connect students from the two schools and to renovate St. Joseph, a building with no running water; electricity, cafeteria or restrooms. The group estimates renovations will cost \$15,000.

This is not the first time New Trier students have helped with an international cause, but the homegrown ties set the project apart, teachers said.

Bonhomme and Cayemitte came to New Trier more than six years ago — first Cayemitte and then Bonhomme.

Bonhomme had a job as top chef at Pane Caldo in the Gold Coast, but Cayemitte thought he might like the security of a second position with good benefits and mentioned New Trier. Bonhomme jumped at the chance, even if it meant his days started at 7 a.m. and often didn't end at the restaurant until after 11 p.m.

"You got to do what you got to do," Bonhomme said.

At New Trier, the men whose fathers played cards every night in Petit Goave eat lunch together every day. They talk about life in the suburbs — Bonhomme lives in Roselle and Cayemitte in Skokie — and their hopes for the budding alliance between New Trier and St. Joseph.

They envision a larger elementary school that can serve more than the current 164 students. They want to outfit each classroom with desks, patch holes in the building that dates to 1952 and build a kitchen.

Both men said the hope of rebuilding St. Joseph School is rooted in hometown ties. Bonhomme's sister, Alice, serves as principal, the post their father once held.

"My dream is to continue my father's dream, to help kids go to school," Bonhomme said. "That's my town."

tmalone@tribune.com