

The Miami Herald

Tuesday, September 28, 2004

'All Gone': South Florida Woman in Haiti to Bury 19 Relatives

BY SUSANNAH A. NESMITH, snesmith@herald.com

PAULIN, Haiti—Claudette Derisma stood on the foundation of her grandmother's house and wept. She cried for her grandmother and her sister. She cried for cousins she grew up with and infant nieces and nephews she hadn't even met yet.

Derisma, a researcher for the Miami-Dade County Clerk's Office, arrived Monday in the village where she was born to help bury the 19 relatives she lost to floods that swept northern and central Haiti last week.

As she surveyed the damage, Derisma cried for the houses that are gone, the one she was born in, the one where she played as a child. She cried for the mango tree where she used to hang a hammock and nap in the shade. For the farmland that yielded the fruit of her childhood, now destroyed. And for the little chapel where she was baptized, now full of six inches of mud.

She cried for the Haiti she has always known, and for a tiny place that will never be the same.

"Now everybody is gone, everything is gone, it's all gone," she sobbed.

"Ten of us were born here but now it's gone."

Derisma already missed the funeral for her Aunt Anne - Tropical Storm Jeanne, which caused this flood, had arrived in Florida as a hurricane, and her flight was canceled.

"I thought you weren't coming," scolded her oldest sister, Julie Derisma, a North Miami Beach busi-

nesswoman who managed to fly to Haiti before Jeanne threatened Florida. "There is so much to do, they need so much help."

COUSINS FROM FLORIDA

Cousins also came from Miami and Jacksonville. More were expected from New York and Montreal. A cousin, Kevin Michel, a U.S. Marine stationed in Jacksonville who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, took emergency leave to come help.

"I was on the phone with my grandmother before the storm," said Michel, a North Miami Beach High School graduate. "I told her to leave because it was going to be bad. My aunt came to get her but she said she survived a storm 50 years ago and she could survive this."

The grandmother, the family matriarch, with 12 children, died in the waters. They were among the more than 1,500 people that Jeanne killed in Haiti. The storm also left more than 200,000 people homeless in Gonaives.

The U.S. relatives arrived with bags full of clothes for their family, and with money to help bury the dead. Friends of Claudette's at the clerk's office collected money and clothes to send to her family.

"Everyone wants to help," she said. "Some give two dollars, five dollars, 20 dollars. There is so much need here."

After meeting in the town of Port-de-Paix, the out-of-town relatives traveled by car to the Trois River that runs by Paulin. Both sisters and a group

of cousins and nieces and nephews crossed the river. Julie walked across in water up to her waist, holding her dress around her chest. A cousin carried Claudette across on his shoulders.

'WE HAD EVERYTHING'

On the other side, they found what used to be a cluster of eight houses, their family's settlement.

"We had everything here," Claudette said, anguished. "Tomatoes, goats, corn, chicken, sweet potatoes and lots of fresh air. It was good here."

The crops were lost, the houses ripped down by the water.

"These houses were concrete," she exclaimed. "It's not like they were made of cardboard."

A nephew pointed out the tree he climbed with his 22-day-old baby in his arms during the floods. He lost his other child. Many of the dead in Derisma's family are children.

"It seems we lost more than survived," she said, weak with grief. "We cannot hardly count them all."

The sisters wanted to bring as many family members as possible from the village to Port-de-Paix for the funeral of a cousin Monday afternoon. Most said they couldn't go. They didn't have any shoes to wear.

About 100 people arrived for the service, gathering in a tin-roofed chapel with no glass in the windows and grieved.

Baboune Decoli, daughter of the victim, collapsed sobbing into the arms of her husband. They also lost a three-year-old son.

Claudette Derisma struggled to comfort her.

Many wailed as they sent one of their own on with hymns and praise for a God who was difficult to comprehend in this city named for peace.

"God, we know you haven't given up on us," Pastor Bruno Alcine told the family.

Later, the sisters planned to go to the hospital to visit survivors. And when Claudette heads back to Miami, she plans to get a second job.

"They have nothing," she said. When they have problems, I do two jobs to help them. I work part time as a nurse. Nobody is going to come here to help them so the family must do it. I will find more work."

She looked around a tiny little place that held so many memories for her.

"The river is very powerful when it's upset," she said.