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## HAITIAN OUT-OF-SCHOOL YOUTH LIVELIHOOD INITIATIVE PROJECT

# LIFE STORIES OF OUT-OF SCHOOL-YOUTH

**EQUIP3 / Youth Trust: Learning and Earning for Out-of-school Youth** is a program designed to prepare and engage out-of-school children, youth and young adults for their roles within the world of work, civil society and family life. Youth Trust seeks to achieve this purpose through strengthening youth and youth serving organizations, including non governmental organizations, government agencies, private businesses, and education and training providers.

Since December 2003, Equip3 through EDC with the financial and technical support from USAID has been implementing a project for out-of-school youth in Haiti called IDEJEN. After a good assessment of the real conditions of youth in three selected pilot areas, IDEJEN through small community based organizations started to offer services to youth in non formal basic education, technical skills and livelihood accompaniment. After 10 months of implementation, IDEJEN, with the support of Erin Barton from Street Kids International, has identified positive changes in the life of our participating youth through interviews with 10 youth from Port-au-Prince, Mirebalais and Jérémie.

Below are the different testimonies for your understanding and appreciation.





## Jesula Jerila (OSY- Rocher d'Horeb, Petit Place Cazeau) – 15 years old

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Fifteen years old Jesula Jerila is a *restavek*, or a child servant, who lives in Petit Place Cazeau, and frequents Rocher d'Horeb center. Her story is one of many of children who are taken from their families in the countryside to work in the homes of people in Port-au-Prince. *Restaveks* are denied their right to an education and are bound to servitude. It is such a norm in poor communities across Haiti that many never realize that they deserve more. IDEJEN's program is well designed to be accessible to *restaveks* and agreeable to their "madames" ("employers"). Jesula's story is one that illustrates the possibility of IDEJEN's programming to create systemic change in Haiti by equipping *restaveks* with skills that can help them to become independent.

Jesula Jerila is the youngest of thirteen children born to a family in Belle-Anse, Haiti. Her mother is a coffee merchant and her father a gardener.

Two years ago a stranger came to visit her parents; he was a pastor that came to Belle-Anse as part of a church mission. He spoke politely with her parents and was very kind to Jesula and all her brothers and sisters. "Our parents did not have anything and he offered to take us to help our family." The next day, Jesula's parents sent her and her older sister to Port-au-Prince with the pastor. She and her sister were split up to work in two different homes as *restaveks*. Jesula came to live with Madame P. and her sister went to work for a family in Petionville. She has not seen her sister or family since, but sees the pastor each week at the Evangelist Church.

Madame P. is married and has eight children. Her husband works outside of the home and Madame P. sells *paté* (patties). They are poor and don't earn enough to provide for the family. Jesula is responsible for caring for the eight children, hand-washing all the laundry, mopping, cleaning, and making food. She alone does the household chores, and when she is finally finished for the day she finds a place to sleep on the floor. Some days, if there is not enough to eat, she sleeps hungry. Despite all the misery Jesula remains loyal to the family, who she says has never really mistreated her, but admits that she is not happy to be living with them. She misses her mother and father but will not go back to them because she doesn't want to be a burden.

She was excited to learn about the center's programs from another young girl in the community, and received permission from Madame P to be able to participate. The youngest of Madame P's children attend school at the same time that Jesula goes to the center, so there is no conflict with her childcare responsibilities. Jesula says that they don't have a problem with her going to the center as long as she completes all her housework.

At the center she is learning how to sew and how to do *macramae*, a kind of artisan weaving. She doesn't yet know how to sew everything that she wants to but is learning quickly. She is also doing very well in reading and writing classes. She wants to finish school and sees that learning how to sew is her key to living independently. Once she finishes the program, she plans to look for work in a factory and eventually rent a small house for herself. Maybe, then, she'll have the courage to ask the pastor where her sister is and they can be together again. She's confident:

***"I'll find my own route! I am proud of myself for the things that I do and because I work hard. I don't get into trouble like other kids who are on the streets, and I respect people very much. It is a great chance for me to be going to the center."***



### Mimose Jean (OSY- ESSAIS, Jeremie) – 15 years old

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At the age of two, Mimose's mother and father died of illness. Ever since, she lived with her aunt in the city of Jeremie. She refers to her aunt as her mother, and her young cousin as brother, but even though she was only a toddler when her parents died, she remembers them well. Her father was from Belladair in southern Haiti and her mother from Jeremie. Her aunt has always cared for her, and even though Mimose's aunt does not work they always seem to find enough money to eat.

Now, at the young age of fifteen, Mimose gives the impression that she is a mature and responsible young adult. She has been studying at IDEJEN ESSAIS center in Jeremie for more than a year and is learning not only literacy and technical skills but also how to set goals for herself and make plans for her life. She has a special relationship with her teachers at school and feels encouraged by them. She wants people to know that she is a good person; that she respects others; that she believes in God; and that nothing can take her values away from her.

She says that before she joined the center she would just stay at home and play with other children, but now she must prepare for school, arrive on time and do her homework. Her teacher at the center reports that she is hard-working and loves studying. At ESSAIS Mimose learns how to read, write and make fruit wines and natural syrups. "The syrups are made from special plants and leaves that can help people to stay healthy," she eagerly explains.

One day she wants to be able to make the wines and syrups by herself and sell them all over Haiti and in North America. Her big dream in life is to go to New York and she is determined to do whatever it takes to be able to travel. For Mimose, the journey to New York begins with the thirty-minute walk to the center each day where she continues to learn all that she can.



## Violane Du Vel Saint (OSY- OFPM, Mirebalais) – 17 years old

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Born and raised in Mirebalais, seventeen year old Violane Du Vel Saint has had the responsibility of caring for herself and her sick mother since she was only fifteen. She is the oldest of her mother's six children, all of whom have different fathers. She knows her own father who helps her when he can, but she is most attached to her mother. Two years ago her mother fell sick with a kidney problem. When she became bed-ridden, Violane made arrangements for her younger brothers and sisters, age four through fourteen, to go and live with relatives or their fathers. She and one sister stayed together to take care of her mother.

People who know them and are aware of their mother's condition often give them small amounts of money so that they can live. While they are always grateful for what they get, Violane has never wanted to live off of charity and always longed for work. A person near her house who knew that she wasn't doing anything invited her to the center to try out their programs. When she joined nearly a year ago she was desperate for an activity to occupy her time and wanted to learn a useful skill. Already a strong cook, Violane decided to join the cooking and baking training at the center to master the profession. Not only is she becoming a master chef, she is already beginning to work and earn money. Violane is part of a small team of women that prepares food for seminars and meetings, many which IDEJEN hosts. If the seminar is large Violane can earn up to 500 gourdes (equivalent of \$12 US).

*"I am so happy when I earn money and my mom is happy for me, too. I feel successful! When I prepare food for others it helps to put food on our table."*

Violane is talented and skillful. Now she is eager to learn how to save, and *jere kob* (manage money). Her success is also an inspiration to others in the cooking program who can see that it is a practical and valuable skill to develop.

*"I realize that I have a great metye in my hands."*



## Marie-Diala Jean-Baptiste (OSY- ESSAIS, Jeremie) – 20 years old

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Marie-Diala is a proud and confident twenty year old who studies in the third grade class at the IDEJEN center ESSAIS in Jeremie.

She is originally from the community of Seignette in the southern province of Haiti. Fifteen years ago when she was a young child, her mother moved her and her younger siblings to the city of Jeremie so that they could go to school. Despite her mother's hard work as a pistachio merchant in the market, neither Marie-Diala nor her six brothers and sisters were ever able to complete a school year. Now, after so many years of wishing that she could go to school, she is studying at ESSAIS center.

Shortly after they came to Jeremie, Marie-Diala ended up working as a servant in someone's home. She experienced great hardship and eventually turned to the street. After re-uniting with her mom as a teenager she became responsible for taking care of her younger family members and doing chores around the house. She was relieved to be back at home but still longed to go to school.

Marie-Diala's opportunity to join ESSAIS came one day when the center's coordinator came to her house. He had heard that she was not doing anything and invited her to the center. She attended the orientation and hasn't missed a day since.

Before she connected with ESSAIS she would spend the afternoons gossiping, telling jokes with friends, fighting with other youth, and dreaming of a better life for herself. Since she has been involved with programming at the center she says her whole routine has changed. She is able to busy herself with something productive. When she wakes up in the morning she washes her laundry, does her chores and then prepares to go to the center. Each afternoon she spends two hours at the center learning how to read and write and developing technical skills that will help her to earn a living when she is finished. She is happy to be learning how to make wine and syrups that are very popular in the tourist and artisan markets.

While exchanging stories with a group of youth about how they became connected with the center, Marie-Diala exclaims:

*"Mwen te jwenn mama'm, e apre sa mwen te jwenn 'coordinator'. Se IDEJEN ki te retire'm nan misèr!"*

*«I found my mother, and then I found the coordinator. It is IDEJEN that has lifted me from misery! »*

Since entering the center Marie-Diala has experienced a lot of changes in her life. She doesn't fight with other people any more, and she has learned not to steal and how to get along with others. She recognizes that she has lots to learn about running a good business but she remains dedicated to learning. Her most important goal is to finish school: "it's been my dream since I was a child", she says. She would also like to get married and have children and will work hard in her profession so that her children do not experience the same misery that she did. Most importantly, Marie-Diala wants to work and help others in Jeremie to see that there is hope to have a good life.

She believes that the IDEJEN program is a great opportunity and hopes that other young people, like her who pass their days on the street can also enter the program. "I want my younger brothers and sisters to go to school and have the same chance that I now have", she says. She wants the program to continue and hopes that IDEJEN will help her and her peers in the wine and syrup-making program develop partnerships so that they can sell their products and realize their dreams.



## Robinson Joseph (OSY- AJEBJER, Jérémie) – 19 years old

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The sixth child of seven born to a poor woman in the countryside of Haiti, Robinson Joseph, lacked opportunity and was forced to fend for himself working as a slave since he was a small child. Now nineteen, he is an example of how hope and perseverance invite opportunity.

Robinson Joseph has six older brothers and one younger sibling. At the age of six, a man appeared at his house promising his mother that if she let them take him to work he would be well looked after and that they would feed him each day. He was sent away to work as a *restavek* (child slave) on a farm, digging and hoeing the earth. Occasionally he would see his mother, but spent most of his time working on the farm. As the years passed he would see other children walking by on the road to go to school and asked the farm owner if they would ever send him to school. When he realized that they were never going to send him to school he made a plan to run away.

One evening in the middle of the night he left the farm to go to the city. He walked for several days asking people along the way which direction to Jeremie. When he was tired he would sleep under a tree, always cautious, but relieved that the owners did not come after him. Finally he arrived in Jeremie, where he knew some of his older brothers and sisters were. He found a person from the area near the farm and asked them to deliver a message to the owner that he was never coming back and they need not search for him.

When he first arrived in Jeremie, Robinson would stand near the road all day, trying to meet people and reflecting on his life. One day a youth mapper named Wilson invited him to a meeting at AJEBJER center. Excited about the opportunity to go to school and learn a profession, Robinson joined the program. He is studying to become a tailor and enjoys everything about learning at the center. He explains that he is comfortable with everyone and feels respected as a person and an equal. "The teachers even eat with us... out of the same bowl!"

Robinson now lives with a friend in Jeremie, and when he is not at the center or practicing his tailoring he hangs out with his girlfriend and visits his brothers and sisters. Robinson doesn't know his father and often asks his older brothers to tell him stories about what his dad was like. "My mother is all that I have", he says, but it has been four years since he saw or heard from her. His mother still lives in the countryside and he knows where he can find her but he is waiting until he can finish the IDEJEN program to go for a visit. As his tailoring skills develop he plans to make his mom a dress. He'll take it with him when he goes to visit her- "I know that she will be proud", he says with a smile.

When he finishes at the center he hopes that IDEJEN will help him and his peers to start a tailor shop. This will give them all the possibility to work in their profession and slowly they will pay back the cost of the machines and the shop's rent. He wants more than anything for more youth, especially those in the *provinces* (rural areas) to have the possibility to receive an education and training, and encourages IDEJEN to start a project in the countryside.

**"I want people to see me for whom I am: a man that should be respected, a man that has a talent and skill to put clothes on people's backs!"**

Robinson is a leader. He motivates his peers and isn't afraid to share his story. He remembers where he comes from and recognizes where he is and the opportunity that lies ahead of him.



## Meriane Cadat (OSY- AJEBJER, Jérémie) – 18 years old

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Meriane Cadat is a bright eighteen year old girl who is hopeful about her future. She studies sewing at IDEJEN AJEBJER center in Jérémie and aspires to be a great tailor and designer.

Meriane lives with her grandmother and five of her brothers and sisters in the city of Jeremie where she was born. She has a total of ten siblings, some of whom are children of her mother and some of whom are from her father. Meriane was eight years old when her mother died of *tension* (heart and chest problems), and she went to live at her grandmother's house. She has never known her father and her grandfather died some years ago. Meriane adores her grandmother and appreciates her hard work to care for the family very much. Her grandmother sells *marinade* (fried dough often eaten as a snack) on the street and earns enough money for the family to get by, but unfortunately not enough to enroll all six of the children in school. When her grandmother leaves every morning to sell marinade, Meriane is responsible for taking care of the house and children and preparing food. She has never worked outside of the home and always hoped for an opportunity to learn a profession that can help her to support her brothers and sisters.

While sitting out in front of her house one day a youth mapper passed by and invited her to AJEBJER center for a special gathering they were having. When Meriane arrived she met Madame Previlon, the IDEJEN Field Project Coordinator in Port-au-Prince. She recounts: *"Madame Previlon was a beautiful woman, all dressed up, who told us about all the things that we could do if we came to the center. I liked what she said and I want to be like her-able to go all around Haiti in nice clothes, and that is why I decided to come to the center."*

Inspired by Madame Previlon and welcomed by the center's coordinator and teachers, Meriane joined the program. Only a few months later, Meriane was able to sew skirts and blouses by herself, and she has learned to write and is beginning to read. She has more hope for her life and is encouraged by her grandmother, brothers and sisters who are happy and proud of her. She looks forward to studying for another six months so that she can learn to make pants and men's shirts. Then Meriane plans to get a job working for someone until she has enough money to open a tailor shop with her friends.

*"A lot of people need our profession", she says, "I will work hard so that I never return to the same place again."*

## Sainthilaire Maccen (Youth Mapper, Village Solidarité) – 20 years old

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Recently finished with his secondary school diploma, twenty-year-old Sainthilaire Maccen is working to improve his community by working with IDEJEN as a youth mapper and mentor to youth in one of IDEJEN's newest communities.

Originally born in Marigot near Jacmel, Sainthilaire's family came to Port-au-Prince when he was a young child to see what the city was like and search for work; they never left. Since his mother died two years ago his only surviving family member is a younger sister. Although he knows his father, his father has never helped either him or his sister, and they are otherwise on their own. With a bit of help from an aunt, Sainthilaire has been able to go to school and now he hopes to continue his professional studies as an auto diesel mechanic. Occasionally Sainthilaire does odd jobs for people to earn a bit of money and his work as a youth mapper for IDEJEN has helped him to continue his studies.

In his life, Sainthilaire hopes to graduate college, become more devout in his faith and eventually marry. He has gained tremendous confidence through his participation in IDEJEN as a youth mapper and has been connected with the project since the first mapping exercise. He believes the skills that he has developed and the people that he has met through the youth mapping exercise are valuable for all the work that he wants to do in life.

Some quotes from Sainthilaire:

*"Tout experyans nan pozitif"*- All the experiences [with IDEJEN] have been positive.

*"Mwen vini yon lot moun e mwen gen yon nouvel konesans"*- I have become a new person with new knowledge.

*"Mwen senti'm fyè pou tout sa mwen te fe nan pwaje IDEJEN"*- I am proud of what I have done with the IDEJEN project

## Stanila Bicerette (Youth Mapper and Volunteer, GREDEV Nazon) – 20 years old

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Stanila is an incredible young woman who has beaten the odds! She has dealt with the loss of both parents, the sadness of being separated from her family and the hardship of living in a miserable and insecure situation, yet she remains passionate and dedicated to her dreams. Not only is she realizing her own goals, as a youth mapper for IDEJEN and volunteer at GREDEV center in Nazon, she is helping other youth get their lives on track.

Stanila, now twenty years old, has been on her own for over ten years. Her mother died after being ill for a long time and her father died in an accident when she was a young girl. Originally from a poor family in Jeremie, Stanila had no choice but to go and live with a neighbor in Port-au-Prince who simply provided her with a place to sleep. In secret, she took an *eskont* (a private loan) to pay for school. Stanila explained that if the jealous neighbor, with whom she lives, knew she was going to school she would kick her out. The neighbor, unable to support her own children to go to school, cannot bear that Stanila is so successful. For many years Stanila secretly attended school pretending that she was going to visit friends or to the market during the day. When the neighbor found out that she was studying she threatened to throw her out, and ever since Stanila has been living in an uncomfortable and insecure situation. She has persevered, continues to study, and more recently has been volunteering as an administrative assistant at GREDEV center.

She wakes up at four o'clock in the morning, does her chores, irons her clothes and leaves the house before six AM. In the mornings she spends time on the street trying to create activities with youth, volunteering at the center, and finding quiet places to study. At one o'clock each day she goes to an adult friend's house to eat and then goes to school from two thirty until eight o'clock in the evening. By the time she is finished with school and arrives back at the place where she is living, it is after nine in the evening and everyone is already sleeping. She can sneak in and go to bed.

During her school breaks, Stanila finds work to do that can help her to pay back the *eskont*. The work that she does at GREDEV, and the stipend that they offer, has helped her tremendously. She became connected with the center when a friend, Junior, invited her to join the youth mapping team. Stanila, her mapping partner and the community's agent liaison Isnel Pierreval, successfully completed all components of the youth mapping exercise and had a lot of fun running focus groups with the out-of-school youth in the center. As an administrative assistant volunteer, Stanila provides people with information over the telephone, organizes seminars, keeps the youth updated about special activities, and works on the center's recycling and community clean-up project.

Her younger brother and sister still live with her grandmother in Jeremie, and although she misses them and her hometown, especially Jeremie's famous *comparets* (a kind of baked-good, like a muffin), she is making a life for herself in Port-au-Prince and feels honored to be a part of the project. The formation and training she has received as a youth mapper is valuable to Stanila and she says that she never imagined she could learn so much. She feels proud to wear her IDEJEN t-shirt and for everyone to know that she is part of such a great project. Through her involvement she has made friends who can really understand her and feels supported in her studies and work.

Her goal is to finish her education and study business and organizational management/administration so that she can work hard and have a home for herself. Then, she will be able to live peacefully. But Stanila's plan doesn't end there. She wants to continue working with children and youth, showing them they have hope for the future. One day, when she has lots of experience, she plans to return to Jeremie to give seminars for youth from her home town about how they can change their lives by getting involved and focusing on their goals.



## Ernso Saint-Cyr (OSY-Rocher d'Horeb, Petite Place Cazeau) – 20 years old

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Twenty-year old Ernso is back in school after quitting grade three in 1999. "I was forced to quit because my parents had no means for me to continue and I have four younger brothers to think about." Thanks to IDEJEN's basic education and livelihood program at Rocher d'Horeb center in his community of Petit Place Cazeau, he is getting an education and learning skills that will help him to make a living.

His father died when he was very young and his mother never remarried. Ernso left home as a teenager to help reduce the burden on his mom of caring for him and all his brothers, but he stays in touch and visits her often. He lives in Petit Place Cazeau with a few friends whose parents live abroad and send money back for them. It's not a completely free ride because he is still responsible for paying for food and his own daily costs, but he is safe and comfortable with his friends. To earn money Ernso sells things, does work for people and offers his services. "I don't have any means, I work for what people will give me."

A friend led him to the center and he liked the activities and programs that they offered. He was able to pick up his schooling and also started studying *macramae*. He is learning to make baskets, wall hangings and products that can sell in art boutiques. "They are also practical for holding stuff, and when I get really good I will be able to make furniture, too," he says.

Ernso wants to work to earn money, and when he is stable hopes to marry and have children. He also feels a responsibility to give back:

*"People knew me when I didn't have anything, but now things are changing and when I have a little something I will help others."*

Indeed, a lot of things are changing in his life. Ernso admits that he didn't have a lot of hope and lacked direction, but the center is helping him to make a plan for his life. He's always been a good person who respects people, doesn't steal or tease others, and now he is gaining confidence in himself and beginning to recognize his own personal value.



### Louis Andri (OSY- Mirebalais) – 18 years old

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Louis Andri finished his first year of primary school but never had the chance to continue because his family had no way to support him. He is the fifth child of six. He is eighteen years old and lives alone with his mother. His father died ten years ago from a serious illness and since then things have been more difficult for his family. All his brothers and sisters have families of their own and the youngest left home to search for a better life. His mother sells rice in the market and he has always wanted to work to help her but its not easy for youth to find meaningful work in Mirebalais. Before joining the center he didn't do anything and was losing hope that his situation could ever change.

He kept hearing about the center on the radio and from people talking on the street, and finally decided to check it out. He asked for information and when they explained the programs he immediately decided to join. Louis' days are fuller now. He goes to the center for two hours each day to learn *sevis dan kretien* (hospitality and service i.e. how to work in a hotel). With the skills he is learning he will be able to work in one of Mirebalais' larger hotels or he could open a restaurant.

The center has helped him to begin to set goals again. He doesn't want to grow up to do the same things that his family did- he wants more! He wants to support himself and then be able to marry and have children, knowing that they will live well.

*"The center is providing me with a good metye and is giving me a chance for a future! I want people to know that I will work in my profession and that even though I lacked training before, I am receiving formation now that will help me for all my life."*