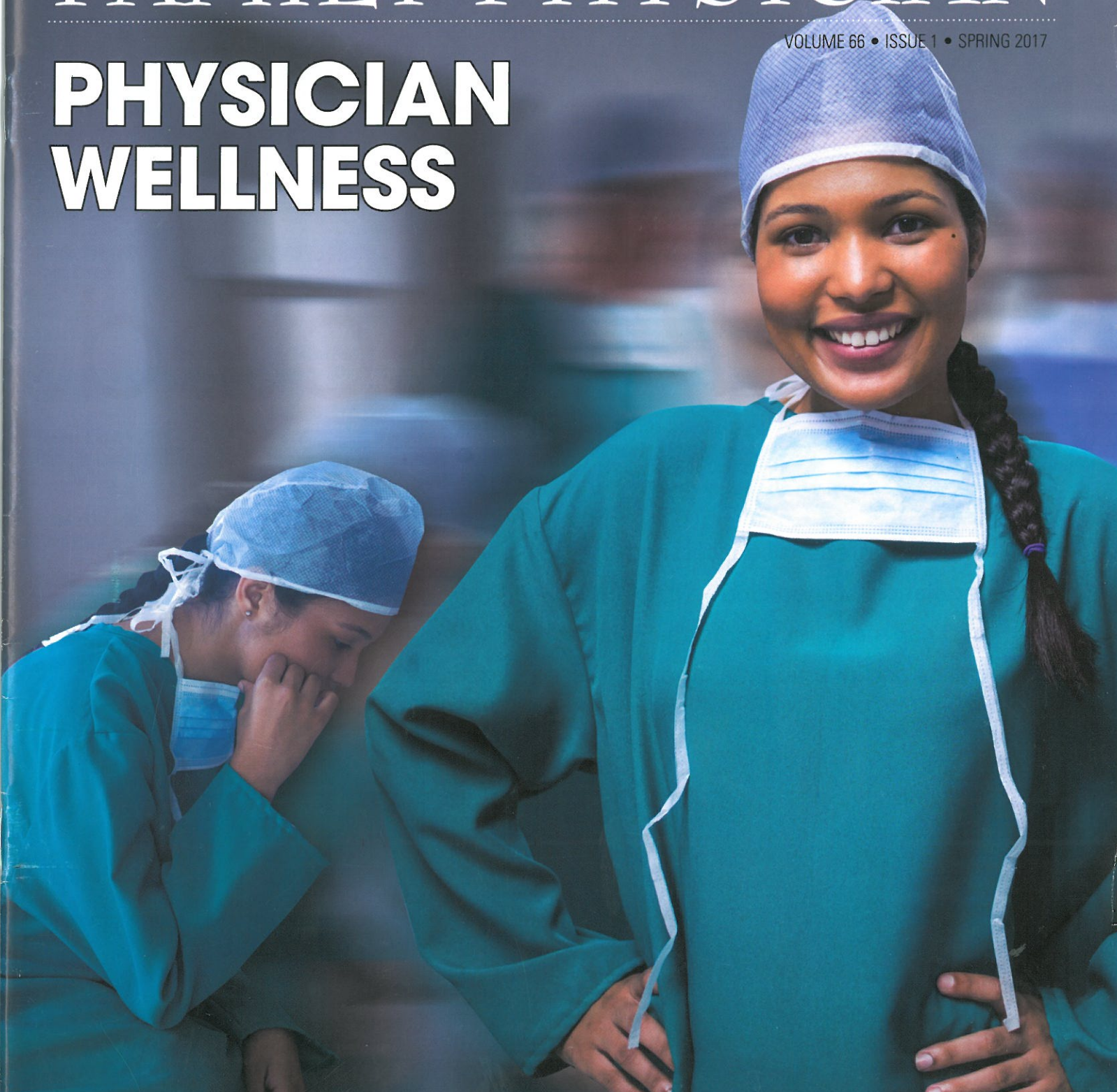


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MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

FAFP Student, Paulin Gotrace



“Florida State University student, Paulin Gotrace, collects and delivers donations for Haitian hurricane relief.”

On the morning of October 4, 2016, Category 4 Hurricane Matthew made landfall on the southwestern island of Haiti, bringing destruction and devastation, particularly to the area of Dame-Marie, a small fishing and farming town, affecting an estimated 1.125 million people.

More than 800 miles away, fourth-year, Florida State University medical student studying at Daytona Beach Regional Campus, Paulin Gotrace, was following the path of the storm in his native hometown feeling helpless, but not for long.

At first, Gotrace turned to his good friend and fellow medical student Dejon Maloney, who was studying at the FSU's Fort Pierce regional campus, for help in organizing some type of relief effort to benefit the people of Dame-Marie.

Then, with hurricane swiftness, word got out, and soon medical students at FSU's all six regional campuses were on board to help, including the College's faculty and staff, members of Bethel Missionary Baptist Church in Tallahassee, where Gotrace and Maloney attended during their second year in medical school, as well as KORE Haiti Inc., a nonprofit, humanitarian organization that supports the Haitian community.

Overwhelmed by the response for his “call for help,” Gotrace and his team of helpers collected enough donated items to fill an 18-foot rental truck. Some of the items donated included: clothing; shoes; toiletries such as deodorants, soaps, toothbrushes, toothpaste; baby products; feminine hygiene products; over-the-counter medicines; water purification tablets; bedsheets and blankets, and more.

“It was truly humbling to see that our small efforts had so much impact,” said Gotrace. “I thought I would probably receive a few donations that I could put in my suitcase and deliver myself.”

Then, as Gotrace recalled, the real work began. He and other fellow medical students crisscrossed the state gathering the donated items from all six regional campuses and other locations, sorting, boxing, and loading them in the truck to drive to Miami, so they could be shipped via container/cargo ship to Haiti.



From Miami, Gotrace and a friend, Merancia Noelsaint, a law student at the University of the District of Columbia, in Washington, D.C., flew to Haiti with the intention of distributing the items to those in need before Christmas. Sounds like a good plan, except Murphy's Law kicked in.

What Gotrace and Noelsaint didn't plan for, were numerous delays at U.S. Customs in Miami.

“Once in Customs, I didn't realize they go through a process of verification that may take weeks,” said Gotrace. “The items were supposed to be out of Customs on Dec. 6, but were delayed and the new date changed to Dec. 19. When my friend and I reached Port-au-Prince (Haiti) on Dec. 19, they were still in Customs.”

Frustrated, Gotrace and Noelsaint headed to Customs in Port-au-Prince to inquire about the delay and were told by Customs supervisors, that many of the items still needed to be verified.

After several hours of clever negotiating, finally Gotrace and Noelsaint were given the green light to take some of the boxed items with them. The next day, the two readied and reloaded the items onto another truck to be transported to Dame-Marie, before making the journey themselves.

Anticipating the delivery of the items in Dame-Marie, Gotrace and Noelsaint went door-to-door, talking to families and learning of their needs. “We assured them the packages to come were not government aid,” said Gotrace.

“The next day, we showed up at their door with a complete package,” said Gotrace. “Families with babies received diapers and baby wipes in addition to the regular packages. In areas where it was difficult to enter by foot, we parked a vehicle in the street and distributed the items from our car. This could have been chaotic, but it was the neighborhood where I grew up and people recognized me and showed me respect.”



In all, more than 150 people received packages from Gotrace and Noelsaint on Christmas, and Gotrace said many commented that they've never seen a distribution of items so organized since the hurricane.

“The smiles on the faces of the people were priceless,” explained Gotrace. “It's not like the packages contained a lot of items, but they were grateful for even the smallest of items – a bar of soap, a new dress or shirt for Christmas – knowing that anything would help, was very satisfying.”

Gotrace said the area is still feeling the effects of Hurricane Matthew. “Some people are still living in tents or with neighbors who were able to rebuild. Most of the people of Dame-Marie make their living through fishing

and farming, so they will need to replenish their fishing gear and replant seeds for new crops.”

“The people of Haiti are grateful for all the assistance they've been given since the Hurricane,” said Gotrace. “However, I believe long-term relief and free aid is not the answer. We need to help them by teaching them sustainability – teach and equip farmers with the tools they need to grow their crops instead of sending rice.”

And, Gotrace practices what he preaches. Upon graduation in May, he plans to go back to Dame-Marie and use the surplus that he's gathered to buy fishing gear from local Haitian vendors to give to those who lost everything. “Haitian people love to work, we can and we know how.”

Gotrace and Noelsaint and the many others who worked so hard gathering items for this worthy project from the very beginning in the aftermath of Hurricane Matthew, believe more than one miracle occurred on Christmas Day. Just when the people of Haiti and specifically Dame-Marie, felt hopeless and helpless, the miracle of hope and happiness was delivered one care package at a time.