

'Make Me Proud'

A Haitian's quest to save his family

By **Gina Chon**
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PORT-AU-PRINCE—"Daddy, when are you coming back?"

That's what Marc Bigot's daughter, 14-year-old Stephanie, asked him last Sunday in Miami as he raced out the door of his home there. Carrying little more than a duffle bag of Band-Aids and a sack of Snickers bars, he was off to Haiti, to find the rest of his family.

"I don't know, baby," he said, hugging her goodbye. "I'll stay there as long as it takes to bring them to America."

A wiry 47-year-old who once owned a modest fleet of Port-au-Prince ice-cream carts, Mr. Bigot (pronounced Bi-JEAU in Creole) is one of the more than 800,000 U.S. residents who claim Haitian ancestry. Scores of Haitians are trying to flee the destroyed city of Port-au-Prince, but Mr. Bigot desperately wanted to get in.

His goal: Reunite his family, then get right back out to start rebuilding their lives abroad. Mr. Bigot was accompanied on his trip by a reporter.

Even though he's an American citizen, the task of leaving Haiti is proving difficult. This past Thursday, the line of cars going toward the U.S. Embassy was miles long.

Meantime, Mr. Bigot is living in the front yard of his badly quake-damaged home. Three nights ago, vigilantes a few blocks away caught a man trying to steal some plantains, and beat him to death.

Mr. Bigot heard the beating in the distance.

"People are scared out there," Mr. Bigot said. "They feel like they have to do what they have to do."

Many Haitian-Americans routinely travel back and forth from their homeland to their adopted country, or send money to Haiti to help family, as Mr. Bigot did. Foreign remittances are estimated to account for about one-fifth of the nation's gross domestic product. Many people also keep homes in both places. The advantage is that hard-earned American dollars stretch much further in Haiti.

"There is an American dream, and a Haitian dream," said Mr. Bigot. "Both places are not easy, but in the U.S., you earn money just to spend it on surviving."

Mr. Bigot is among the lucky ones. The devastating quake may have killed as many as 200,000 people, and on Friday most search teams stopped looking for survivors under the rubble. But even before Mr. Bigot left his little stucco home in Miami about a week ago, he already knew his wife and 2-year-old daughter were alive.

His wife reached him by phone last Saturday, some 96 hours

after the quake. They needed help. "We have nothing to eat," his wife, Olinia, told him in their one brief call, before the line went dead. "Please bring us food for me and your baby."

In the days immediately after the quake, Mr. Bigot said, "My brain couldn't function."

After the call from his wife, he resolved to depart for Haiti on Sunday, the very next day. He'd already been scraping together cash from friends and relatives. Mr. Bigot runs a small business importing and exporting restaurant equipment and other supplies to Haiti. But like many fellow Americans, he's struggling financially: The global economic turmoil means few Haitians needed air conditioners or industrial-sized coolers from him.

Relatives and friends in Miami's sizeable Haitian community helped him out with donations—\$50 here, \$100 there. Many also gave him the names of people they wanted him to search for.

On Sunday, he went to a CVS pharmacy and picked up a first-aid kit, a tin of sardines and a few other supplies for the trip, including the bag of Snickers bars—a treat for his 2-year-old, Oldinia.

As he packed for the trip, his two teenage daughters from a previous marriage, who live with him in Miami, asked if they could eat one of the Snickers. Mr. Bigot jokingly scolded them. "You act like you are the ones that are starving!" he said. "Didn't you just eat lunch?"

He paid some bills, packed his bag—his passport, a Saints T-shirt, some baby wipes—and left his two teens in charge. "Be good," he told them as he left. "Make me proud."

Simply getting into Haiti, at a time when aid workers and supplies were still facing logjams, would be a notable achievement in and of itself. Commercial flights were canceled. His plan: Fly instead into Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic, then drive across the border.

At Fort Lauderdale's airport, he bumped into Marie Cherie, an old friend he hadn't seen in a decade. Ms. Cherie uses a wheelchair. But she, too, was determined to go to Haiti to help her own family.

The two resolved to be travel partners. "We're all in this together," Mr. Bigot told her.

The unusual nature of their trip became apparent once aboard the plane. Hardly any other Haitians were attempting the same thing. Most passengers were Dominicans going home.

Arriving in Santo Domingo Sunday evening, Mr. Bigot tried to book a car straight out to the border—until a policeman got involved and demanded a bribe of several hundred dollars.

Eventually, Mr. Bigot and Ms. Cherie found a cheaper option and booked bus tickets for the next day. "It's a luxury bus," Mr. Bigot said.

"There won't be any chickens or goats on this bus."

They found a hotel to try to get a few hours' sleep before the final six-hour run across the border and into Haiti.

Monday's bus trip proved to be scenic and expansive. As Étang Saumâtre, Haiti's largest lake, came into view, Mr. Bigot got excited. "Look, it's the lake!" he said, straining his neck to take in the vista. Ms. Cherie began clapping and singing a tune.

Pulling in to Port-au-Prince, the true scale of the devastation was concealed by the darkness of evening. Still, Mr. Bigot gasped at what he saw. "That's the biggest supermarket store in Haiti," he said, pointing to a pile of rubble. "Woah, woah," he said over and over.

Finally approaching his own neighborhood, he found the streets blocked by families sleeping outside. So he walked the rest of the way, lit only by moonlight, calling out "Marc is back." Neighbors came to welcome him.

The gate of his own yard swung open, and soon Mr. Bigot and his wife and daughter held each other in a long embrace. "It's ok, my dear," Mr. Bigot said, stroking his wife's hair. "I'm here."

Olinia, his wife, began making a pot of spaghetti over a fire, the only light in the yard. That night, the family slept together in the yard, afraid to spend too much time in the badly damaged house.

The exhausting, two-day journey from suburban Miami to his quake-shattered home in Port-au-Prince was complete. And that was the easy part.

On Tuesday, Mr. Bigot quickly encountered the challenges, big and small, of life in post-quake Haiti. He wanted to find his 79-year-old father, alive and living in a distant part of town, but first needed some gas for his Mitsubishi Montero SUV. He sent a neighborhood boy to see if he could find any.

While waiting, he sat in a plastic, burgundy-colored chair in front of the partially collapsed walls of his cinder-block house. A few broken chunks of concrete from the house lay scattered on the ground.

In this neighborhood, Mr. Bigot is clearly seen as something of a big shot. He may be struggling financially in the U.S., but a dollar goes far in Port-au-Prince. Mr. Bigot has often been able to afford a maid and a driver.

"Marc is a big man around here," said Raicardy Solino, 24. "We look up to him."

Pastor Enoch Durceus comes by to ask for money to help rebuild a church in the neighborhood. An elderly woman stopped to request some money for food.

"These people think I've made it," Mr. Bigot laments. "But I barely have enough to take care of my own family."

The neighborhood needs all the help it can get. But no aid groups have come to Impasse Caiman Street, where Mr. Bigot lives. The residents are recovering from the damage themselves, including burning dead bodies. People remain buried in collapsed buildings. The stench of death is overpowering. Many residents live under bedsheets tied up as makeshift tents.

One resident, Antoine Albert, 56, is assembling a list of what the neighborhood needs, including sanitation kits, water and medicine.

But he doesn't know who to give the list to.

Erick Cadret, 51, has spent days digging and whacking away at a pile of concrete that used to be his home. First he was trying to rescue his 14-year-old daughter, who lay underneath. He managed to free her after eight hours, but she didn't survive. More recently, he's been trying to salvage what he could from his home.

"I have nothing," he said as he hit a block of cement with an old hammer. "I need to find something from this house, or I'll continue to have nothing."

Scenes like these take a severe toll on Mr. Bigot and his neighbors. There is so much to do, it's nearly impossible to know where to start. It's not uncommon to see groups of young men in their 20s or 30s, sitting together smoking cigarettes and drinking beer, but barely speaking, having run out of things to say after spending hours together.

"Only the strong can survive this," said Javier Ford, 34. "Our brains are being turned upside down."

In the afternoon, a new scare: The possibility of rain. With so many people living under tents made of cloth, even a drizzle can be a disaster. People scrambled to try to protect their belongings. To general relief, the drizzling petered out.

The boy finally returned with some gas. But they couldn't get the SUV started. Dusk fell. Mr. Bigot's first full day home came to an end.

On Wednesday, Mr. Bigot finally got the SUV rolling and decided to make his first foray out into the city to look for relatives. Just as he was about to leave, he broke out in a sweat, vomited and began crying.

"I don't want to see too much, because I'll cry too much," he said, holding a bottle of water with a shaking hand. "I'm afraid of what's out there. I feel all this pressure coming down on me."

Eventually, he set out, but only after arranging for someone else to drive so he could close his eyes to sights he didn't want to see. He wore a mask to help protect against the stench. Passing a collapsed school, he closed his eyes.

Besides tending to basic needs, Mr. Bigot's biggest task is figuring out how he can get his wife and daughter out of Haiti. His two-year-old is a U.S. citizen, Mr. Bigot says, but his wife needs a visa. They were supposed to be in the U.S. back in December. But because of an incorrect address, paperwork was delayed, Mr. Bigot says.

The family has an appointment at the U.S. Embassy this coming Monday, which was scheduled before the quake. But Mr. Bigot isn't sure if the appointment will be honored, given the crisis.

Nighttime in Port-au-Prince is pitch black. There's no electricity. The darkness is punctuated with the sound of groups of friends entertaining themselves by singing folk songs and spirituals.

It's also a fearful time, and by midweek Mr. Bigot's neighborhood—like many in the city—was swept with concerns that escaped convicts from quake-destroyed jails could be causing trouble nearby.

That partly explains Wednesday night's beating death of the man caught stealing some plantains.

One of the men who participated in the beating claimed that the thief was, in fact, an escaped convict. "We have to be the police now," he said.

By the time Thursday dawned, Mr. Bigot finally had absorbed the scope of the destruction and said he was feeling better. "I'm getting used to it," he said. "I'm letting things be."

Driving out into the city to begin in earnest his effort to rebuild and ultimately return to Miami, he got caught up in a massive traffic jam of cars, taxis, buses, trucks flooding out of Haiti, toward the border with the Dominican Republic—the route he had taken into Haiti just a few days earlier.

"Looks like no one wants to stay here," Mr. Bigot said.

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