

IN GOOD FAITH

Matthew Schobert

"Louis is unaccounted for," executive director Pete Langen announced in his characteristically laconic New England manner, typical of his ability to say a mouthful with just a few words. It was the September 2002 meeting of Food for All's Board of Directors and Pete's comment, brief though it was, immediately captured everyone's attention.

"What do you mean, 'unaccounted for'?" Brenda Rivas asked; a discernible note of caution sounded in her voice.

"Unaccounted for," shrugged Pete, apparently unsure of what else to say. "He's not at CIRAD and he hasn't returned to Jacmel. I spoke with Blaise a couple days ago and asked about Louis. Blaise said Louis never returned to Jacmel. I called CIRAD to see if he was still there doing additional training, but they said, not only was he not there, he had never even arrived." A disturbing quiet settled over the group. Pete finally uttered what everyone feared, "It doesn't look like Louis is going back to Haiti." After an uncomfortable pause, Allison Crane shattered the silence, "Well, aren't we going to report this to INS?" Her tone of voice was clear; she was charting a course of action, rather than voicing a question for discussion. Brandon Dicorte's level of unease sky rocketed.

Food for All

Food for All was a faith-based, non-profit organization of Christian volunteers and professionals committed to the alleviation of global hunger. It was started in 1974 by an ecumenical partnership of agricultural missionaries from the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), American Baptist International Ministries (ABIM), and the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR). FFA, located in central Louisiana, just north of Alexandria, worked toward its mission by providing training, education, and on-site assistance in sustainable agricultural development, appropriate technologies for resource-poor communities in developing countries, and conservation. The bulk of FFA's funding came from individual donors, churches, and local foundations; they also operated a few income-generating projects, such as a community supported organic garden and a fair-trade store with coffees, teas, and hand-made goods from artisans in developing countries. FFA conducted a variety of community education, awareness, and outreach programs for the local and regional community. The centerpiece of their work, however, was training interns who would practice and teach

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sustainable agriculture in rural international settings.

FFA recruited domestic and international candidates for 15- and 12-month internships, respectively. FFA was not a sending agency; it did not sponsor, commission, or financially support international development workers. Domestic interns, therefore, typically came to FFA from Christian or humanitarian mission or relief and development agencies, often from MCC, ABIM, or UMCOR, for fifteen months of training and education. Domestic interns spent nine months at Food for All, followed by three months at an on-site FFA agricultural development partnership program at one of four locations in Central America. Interns completed their training with a three-month capstone experience back at FFA where they integrated their work in Central America with their training at FFA. They also reflected upon and shared their on-site agricultural experiences with others at FFA and with local community organizations.

International interns came from countries around the world, particularly tropical countries in Central America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and South-Central Asia for a twelve-month internship program. These interns went through the same application process as domestic interns. They completed a lengthy application process that required detailed personal information, educational background, professional skills, work experience, and a list of references. Applicants also had to write brief responses to six essay questions and a short essay describing why they wanted to intern at FFA, what they hoped to learn, and how they planned on using what they learned after completing the internship. In addition to all of this, international interns were required to secure a visa to enter the United States. FFA assisted international applicants with the application process and the agency paid all fees and expenses for a twelve-month business-training visa. At the end of the twelve-month period, international interns returned home to their countries and introduced the training and education they learned from FFA to their local communities.

International interns made several unique contributions toward fulfilling FFA's mission. First of all, these interns "internationalized" FFA. They provided unique opportunities for FFA staff, volunteers, supporters, and especially domestic interns to interact with and learn from people of other cultures. This process began preparing domestic interns for many common experiences and challenges they would certainly face when they traveled to their host country. International interns also represented, to FFA supporters and to local and regional communities, the driving purpose of the organization—to work toward the alleviation of hunger in developing countries. They also made unparalleled contributions to FFA's work because they generally represented key leaders and decision-makers in their communities of origin. International interns were embedded in the history, culture, and values of their communities and countries. They possessed keen awareness of their communities' strengths and weaknesses, of local assets and needs, and they could often identify what agricultural practices and technological interventions would or would not work in those contexts. Plus, international interns shared their knowledge of agricultural methodology, practice, and skills with FFA staff, enriching and expanding the agency's knowledge and skill base.

Perhaps the single most important aspect of hosting international interns was that, upon returning to their homes, they were naturally viewed as "one-of-the-community." They were indigenous, insiders rather than outsiders.

This bypassed a myriad of cross-cultural and relationship-building obstacles common in international relief and development work. Additionally, unlike domestic interns, because international interns were returning home, their level of investment and commitment usually far exceeded that of domestic interns whose work, while crucial, often lasted for only a matter of months or years, as opposed to decades and generations. In their efforts to alleviate global hunger and reduce poverty, FFA staff and supporters understood that international interns represented the most effective and efficient use of the agency's limited resources.

Brandon Dicorte, LMSW

Although Brandon Dicorte was the newest FFA staff member, he had a long history with the organization. Brandon had attended Louisiana College in Pineville, Louisiana. Louisiana College was, a small, Christian university located near Alexandria, where he double-majored in social work and public administration. During his years as an undergraduate, he volunteered at FFA through community service programs at Louisiana College and with members of Hope Chapel, a small, non-denominational congregation he attended. After college Brandon enrolled in a graduate social work program at Tulane University in New Orleans. He earned his master degree in social work with a concentration in healthcare and started working in pediatric oncology at Tulane University Hospital and Clinic. Three years later he returned to Alexandria when Laura, his wife, began her medical residency program at Community Family Practice, a holistic healthcare clinic that served low-income and uninsured people and families. Shortly after this move, Brandon was hired as a social work supervisor at St. Mary's Children's Home. For the next ten years he worked at St. Mary's in a variety of social work administrative positions.

Brandon and Laura joined Reconcilers Fellowship, a bi-lingual, multi-cultural Mennonite church. About sixty people attended this small house church. It was completely lay-led, there were no paid staff. Pastoral responsibilities rotated between three men, and men and women shared equally in all teaching responsibilities. Although not everyone at Reconcilers Fellowship was bi-lingual, congregational worship was in English and Spanish. Another distinctive mark of this small community of faith was the high level of commitment to social ministries. Nearly every member of Reconcilers Fellowship was regularly involved in Christian service. Some worked with Habitat for Humanity, others volunteered in after-school tutoring programs for children, several worked at local food banks and homeless shelters, and all of them advocated peace and non-violence. Many members of this congregation were also active supporters of FFA. This community's sense of compassion and justice for the poor and vulnerable struck a chord with the Dicortes. These Christians with whom Brandon and Laura worshiped and formed community obviously took very seriously the radical nature of Christian discipleship. Their commitment to living the ethics of the Kingdom of God, as Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount, challenged and nurtured Brandon to live a life shaped by the Gospel, rather than to settle for a comfortable form of cultural Christianity.

With the birth of their second child approaching, Brandon began considering other employment options. He no longer wanted to be on call 24-hours a day, 7-days a week, as he was as one of the senior administrators for St. Mary's. He wanted more time to help raise his sons and he

desperately wanted to work more directly on issues of social justice. Learning of these desires, Pete and several members of FFA's board, some of whom attended Reconcilers Fellowship, approached Brandon about the possibility of his assuming some of the agency's administrative, business, and development work in order to free Pete to focus more on training interns and managing operations of the 60-acre farm. Recruiting Brandon, because of his administrative and development experience at St. Mary's, reflected FFA's organizational growth toward creating a more specialized staff. This seemed just the opportunity Brandon had been praying for. He could reduce his workload, spend more time with his wife and children, and work with what he considered to be a truly unique faith-based organization committed to alleviating hunger and poverty while practicing environmental stewardship. Brandon joined the staff in November of 2001 as their first full-time Development Director. Nine months later he found himself in a most uncomfortable predicament.

Louis Touissant

Louis Touissant was a rather large man, nearly six feet tall and somewhat stocky. His imposing size belied a quiet, gracious, extremely deferential person. Perhaps his personality had been tempered by the forty-odd years of grinding poverty and inescapable suffering he knew from rural village life in Haiti; perhaps it reflected a combination of cultural deference and his limited English language skills.

Louis arrived at FFA in June of 2001, several months before Brandon joined the staff. Louis, however, was no stranger to FFA, its staff, or volunteers, including Brandon. FFA had been working in the rugged rural landscape of southeastern Haiti, particularly in the village of Petit Jacmel, since 1981. From the very beginning of FFA's development work in Jacmel, Louis was involved. In 1987, his older brother, Blaise, successfully founded Food for All, Haiti (FAH), a sister-agency to FFA. FFA and FAH worked closely together to promote agricultural, technical, and educational programs in the village and district of Jacmel. Louis, who had completed agroforestry training at Port-au-Prince's Agricultural Polytechnic Institute, taught basic agroforestry skills and education at FAH's training center. He often expressed an interest in coming to FFA for additional training and education. Because his English skills were far too limited to make him an eligible intern candidate, he enrolled in several English courses in Jacmel. He earned high marks in every class and finally achieved his goal—he applied to FFA and was accepted as an intern.

Unfortunately, Louis did not adjust well to life in central Louisiana or as a FFA intern. Being from the tropics, he had great difficulty coping with the cool fall and cold winter weather. And, despite the good grades he earned in his English courses, his language skills proved to be much poorer than anyone expected. As a result, he had a hard time communicating with others and understanding what was said to him. Although he usually indicated that he understood what others were saying, it frequently turned out he did not understand, often not at all.

Louis's relationship with the staff and other interns soon became strained when he refused to share in any of the routine domestic chores that were part of life on the farm and in the dormitory. Although these communal responsibilities had been explained in the application materials, Louis seemed to be of the opinion that men, particularly educated men, did not

participate in preparing or cleaning up after meals, doing dishes, or general cleaning in the dining hall, kitchens, and bathrooms. These tasks belonged to women and children. His attitudes about gender did not entirely surprise the staff at FFA. They had experienced this with many men from developing countries. But, it did create added tensions between Louis and some of the interns, particularly with female interns, because Louis often expected them to do his dormitory chores for him.

Something else, however, not only surprised the FFA staff, it confounded them. Louis began talking about going to Christian International Relief and Development (CIRAD), another agricultural development agency located in Sarasota, Florida, for additional training and education. Louis broached this topic with Pete on several occasions. Brandon, whose office was directly across the hall from Pete's, regularly overheard these conversations. On a particularly cold day in February, Louis announced he was going to CIRAD and from CIRAD he would return directly to Petit Jacmel. Because neither Pete nor Brandon could convince him to finish his internship at FFA, they helped pack his belongings for the trip. Before he departed, they made it a point to discuss his visa restrictions with him, emphasizing his responsibility to adhere to his August return date. Although Louis had spent nearly seven months improving his English skills, they were painfully clear with him on this point, particularly considering past instances in which he misunderstood conversations or instructions. Louis reassured them he would return to Haiti in accordance with his visa.

Once Louis left FFA, Pete and Brandon never heard from him again. Louis never contacted them. He never arrived at CIRAD. He never contacted his brother. He never returned to Haiti.

The Board Meeting

FFA enjoyed the strong support of a deeply committed and very active Board of Directors. Unlike many agency boards, this board not only made decisions and set policy for the agency, but nearly every member was also physically involved with many of FFA's projects and most were well-known to the interns and volunteers. The board met every other month and standing committees met between board meetings. FFA's standing committees included Executive, Program, Fundraising and Development, and Public Relations. Pete served as the *ex officio* member of the Executive and Program committees and Brandon was the *ex officio* member on the Fundraising and Development and the Public Relations committees. Although Pete and Brandon were not members of the board, they worked very closely with these committees, submitted staff reports to the entire board, and were involved, to a large degree, in the agency's decision-making processes.

Everyone at FFA was very involved in evangelical or mainline Christian congregations. Ironically, despite their deep faith-commitments, neither the board nor the staff engaged in much 'religious' or 'God-talk.' They shared a common worldview that informed FFA's mission—"Food for All is an organization of Christian volunteers and professionals who are committed to the communication of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to the alleviation of hunger around the world"—and were each committed to working for and alongside of the world's poor. Theologically, everyone enjoyed a strong kinship.

Pete, Brandon, and two of the board members worshiped together at Reconcilers Fellowship, three others attended mainline Protestant churches, and the remaining two attended a large interdenominational, urban church known for its service to the urban poor. This contributed significantly to the deep theological and vocational connections shared between staff and board members. Everyone knew one another well enough that the obvious—their commitment to following Christ and the practical implications and application of that commitment—was implicitly a part of their conversations. It rarely needed to be made explicit.

Yet, in spite of all of this, Pete's disclosure to the board that Louis had disappeared elicited a wide-range of very strong reactions from board members. "Well, aren't we going to report this to INS?" was one of the first remarks. When Brandon heard it, he became tense and his adrenaline started pumping—hard. He foresaw a serious fight brewing.

"I don't think that's appropriate," Pete replied. "It was Louis's responsibility to leave the country, not ours to make sure he left. Even though our name is on the visa, INS does not give us that responsibility; they never say anything like that in any of the paperwork."

"Well, what have we done in the past?" asked Allen Jeffreys. Allen had joined the board the previous year and, although he was still rather new, he had a knack for seeing multiple solutions to vexing problems. This had proven helpful in resolving tough decisions in the past. "Has this happened before?"

Pete and Angela Santos, the board president, exchanged looks, and, after a thoughtful pause, each shook their heads. "No," they both replied in unison. "This is the first instance in, what, the twenty-something years we've worked with international interns. I don't believe we have any written policies on this either" Angela added. Pete's body language indicated she was correct.

"Do you think this will affect future opportunities for getting visas for other applicants? I mean, if INS or someone finds out," Brenda asked and Allison nodded in agreement. Brenda and Allison were often quick to consider legal and liability issues that might affect the agency.

"I for one think we need a policy to protect ourselves," Jesse Farrar chimed in. Jesse was not on the Board of Directors yet, but his wife, Elizabeth, was and it was a board tradition to invite potential board members to a meeting before issuing them an invitation to join the board. "I don't want this agency to look like a wormhole for illegal immigration. I mean, he basically used us to immigrate, didn't he? Isn't that about right? We can't be seen as somehow encouraging this or as being an easy way for people to come into the country. Do we want to be seen as, 'If you want an easy way into America, try this'?"

"I think it's really easy for people to think that way, Jesse" Brandon intervened. "There's an element of anger we're all feeling over this because that's not why we're in business. We're not getting money from donors to run a non-profit organization that trains international interns to reduce hunger and poverty through sustainable agriculture and then have the interns not return home. I understand some of us being quite upset and wanting to act on that. I just don't know how productive it will be."

"But somehow," Allison stressed, "we've got to write into policy that we will report them if they don't return home. We need to be stronger on this

than we are. And if not a policy, then what?" she blurted out in near exasperation.

"What about our intern screening process?" suggested Allen. "Is there a problem with it? I mean, are there weaknesses in how we recruit and screen potential interns? If some of us are uncomfortable with creating new policies, then perhaps we should consider other things we could do to safeguard ourselves and ensure that international interns do return home – willingly."

"Hey, the screening process can't be that flawed," Brenda observed. "I mean, twenty-something years – isn't that what you said, Angela? – and this is the first time this has happened. Maybe this was the exception."

"Or, perhaps we made an error in judging Louis' application," mumbled Pete.

"What do you mean?" a couple people spoke at once.

With a rather dejected sigh, Pete began. "We've been successful in not having any international interns go AWOL, not because we've been lucky, but because we've always determined that they have sufficient family connections back home to make it as unlikely as possible they would consider staying in the States. Until Louis, this has meant that we've only accepted married men, usually fathers, as interns. We've resisted pressure to accept spouses or children because, with their family present, that would make it all the easier for them to decide to stay here and violate their visa."

"And, Louis, although he is Blaise's brother and has other brothers and sisters in Jacmel, was single and had no children." Angela finished Pete's thought.

"Why did we accept him, then?" asked Jesse.

"We thought we knew him well enough. We've known him since he was a young man when we started working in Jacmel. I saw Louis more as a partner in our work in Haiti than as an international intern. It seemed like a great opportunity for all of us" answered Pete.

"I just can't believe Louis did this!" bemoaned Elizabeth.

"It's frustrating, I know," Brandon replied, "to face this lost opportunity, but Louis's decision-making isn't too hard to understand. There are tens of thousands of Haitians living in south Florida; he even has friends from Jacmel living there. It's entirely possible to understand some of what he was thinking and why he did what he did."

"It's completely understandable," said Pete, a bit more energetically. "He got introduced to American culture. He can find a minimum wage job here and make about a hundred times more than he could make back in Haiti and he can get involved in a strong Haitian community in Florida. It's all completely rational, what's irrational is going back! So, frankly, I'm rather sympathetic and just don't see any reason we should sic our government on him. I mean, most of us don't even believe immigration should be illegal or restricted from poor, developing countries like Haiti. It boils down to an issue of justice, if you ask me. So, it just doesn't follow that since we're in business because we're called to be compassionate to those who suffer, to help them realize opportunities and create better futures for them and their families and their communities – for people like Louis – that we should be a part of forcing them back into lives of poverty and despair. How can we turn around and, just because Louis chose not to go back to Haiti, start calling the government to hunt this guy down and deport him?"

"I agree," interjected Catherine Kendrick. Catherine, an Anglican, was also a member of a lay Franciscan order. She had a long history of

impassioned work with Christian organizations, both in the United States and internationally, on many social justice issues, particularly poverty, hunger, peace and non-violence, and racial reconciliation. Although she had only joined the Board a year before, she was well-respected in the organization. “We’re supposed to be people of compassion,” she continued. “We are called, over and over again in Scripture, to care for the stranger in our land. I mean it’s all over the place. And I don’t think we can rationalize having Louis prosecuted for immigrating here and think we are doing what God would have us do. This may be ‘illegal,’ but in matters of faith, I think we owe a greater responsibility to honoring God and loving our neighbor.”

“Sure, I hear what you’re saying, Catherine, but I’m concerned about our liability,” Allison stressed. “Aren’t we liable to the INS? Can’t they fine us or get us into trouble? Plus, won’t this hurt our chances for getting other interns? And what if word gets out in the community? Do you think people will think twice about supporting us financially if they think we’re looking the other way on issues like this? I think we need to be very pro-active about preventing this from happening again.”

“But Allison, there’s nothing in their literature about us being responsible for this. It rests solely with the international,” Pete reiterated.

“So, what you’re saying is that we’re not *legally* responsible for this in any way?” questioned Percy Manning. “Alright, I can live with that, and quite honestly I’m with Catherine on this one, but, perhaps we should consider what we as an agency should do. You know, what is the ethical thing for us to do?”

“Percy has a point,” Brandon interjected, “it seems like we need to move from ‘We don’t have to do anything’ to considering, ‘What, in good faith, should we do?’”

“Good point, Brandon,” remarked Angela, “what do *you* think we should do?” ❖