

Louder than words

Sunday, August 12, 2007 By Dave Tobin **Staff writer** for the Syracuse Post-Standard online

On a spring evening, Bob Hood walks a dirt road to a country bakery and buys everything.

He is with friends, so they split up heaping armfuls of rolls. Piece by piece, they give them to the tangle of hands reaching toward them. It costs Hood less than \$5 to feed these hungry children and adults, another act of kindness on another day in Haiti.

For five years Hood has been coming to a Roman Catholic parish in this rural village of Thibeau. On the walk to the bakery, he passes people outside their huts of woven sticks and mud and thatch, and they greet him like a godfather.

"Bub! Bub!" He waves and returns a lilted, "Bon soir!"

As Hood returns from the bakery, children play around the front steps of the Kara Hood Center. He stops, holds their gaze, stiffens his body and gestures quickly: Arms up. Arms down. Arms bent like wings, quacking like a duck. Hood and 30 kids giggling together in spontaneous ³Simon says.² He can barely speak Creole, and it doesn't matter. Hood, a real estate developer from Cazenovia, has found something in this Haitian village of 10,000 people. He has built a community center, brought clean water and started to nurture an economy. Hood discovered he can make things better for these people < easier than he can make things better at home, 1,700 miles away.

Kara, his eldest daughter, would have loved the 'Simon says' scene. Her father played the clown when she was growing up. Like him, Kara was a citizen of the world. She spent nine months in South Africa, doing social work in the Soweto ghetto. She fell in love there and talked of marriage. But she returned to the United States and social work in Brooklyn. In 2001, Kara visited her boyfriend in South Africa. E-mailing her parents the night before her return, she told them the passion of her old relationship wasn't there. They were relieved. She was coming home.

Kara was riding to the airport when the taxi driver stopped in the middle of a freeway and ran off. Kara was moving her bags to a different vehicle when another car hit her.

It was a Monday when word got back to Cazenovia. Hood's house had been empty all day, and he returned to a bunch of phone messages. Message one: the State Department, looking for Robert Hood. Message two: the South African consulate, looking for Robert Hood.

Message three: the State Department, looking for Kara Hood's next of kin. Hood turned from the machine. How would he break the news to his wife?

Haiti is a problem for Hood. In the face of overwhelming poverty, poor education and bad water, where do you start? In his professional life as a real estate developer, starting meant capitalizing on opportunities others didn't see. When he first came to Haiti, he considered grapefruit. He'd trip over it rotting on the ground. Couldn't Haitians squeeze juice and sell it?

Hood consulted food science experts at Cornell University. They told him he'd need clean water, electricity and good transportation, none of which Thibeau has. Hood would have to start at square one.

"You can't bring in some textile company to make clothes, like they do in Bangladesh," said Hood. "There's no infrastructure."

At the nearby medical clinic he saw women with malnourished children suffering from water-borne diseases. Over the Internet, Hood found a Florida program, Gift of Water, that provides low-cost water purification systems for homes.

Hood mobilized his Cazenovia church's Haiti committee to raise money for the systems. He contributed several thousand dollars of his own and in January helped distribute the village's first purification systems- 550 of them.

Hood, 62, did well enough in commercial real estate to sell the Robert Hood Co. at age 50 and retire. He had a knack for matching clients' needs with the right location and leveraged one successful deal after another- office buildings, warehouses, apartment complexes and retail stores.

Now he can channel his energy, ideas and abilities toward Haiti. "Whenever he takes on anything, he becomes totally dedicated to it and gets it done," said Jim Breuer, a longtime business partner. "Procrastination doesn't exist."

In the mid-1980s, Hood is snorkeling off a beach in Maui. Nearby on a catamaran, there's a great commotion. John Denver is filming a video. Suddenly, Denver is tossed overboard. He yells that his wallet and passport are gone.

Hood, a big fan, decides to find Denver's wallet.

"I'm really charged up," Hood recalls. "The water's crystal clear. I'm swimming around humming 'Country Roads' through my snorkel. And there's his wallet, his passport, his American Express card. Ba-boom, ba-boom, ba-boom."

By the time Hood reaches shore, Denver and his fiancé are still on the beach. Hood chats up Denver, who invites him to a private concert. Backstage, Denver asks him to join a board of advisers for his environmental project 'Windstar Foundation'. Over the years, they'll meet frequently at Denver's home in Aspen.

In Haiti, Hood had a vision to leverage something big. He struck a deal with Gift of Water, persuading the group to build an assembly plant a mile from the parish headquarters: If it built a building, he would buy land next to it for a model farm program. He would drill a water well.

The assembly plant would provide jobs for Haitians and make it easier to distribute water purification systems in northern Haiti, where the only clean water now comes from a bottle.

In Hood's April visit, he checked out the site. He rode in the front seat of a truck between the Rev. Joseph Almyre, pastor of St. Ives parish, and Ruth Colvin, the founder of Literacy Volunteers of America. Hood brought Colvin here from Syracuse to start a literacy program. Kids die because parents can't read instructions on the water systems.

As the truck bounced past fields of sugar cane and mango trees, Hood sang softly, 'Country roads, take me home, to the place, I belong ...'

Years before Kara's death, Bob and Jean Hood struggled with another separation.

In 1996, Hood's second son, Jason, announced he was entering the seminary. When finished, he would join a semi-monastic order of Catholic priests in Rome, Italy.

As a member of the Friars Minor of Mary Immaculate, he would have little contact with his family. His life would be devoted to the order. He would take a vow of poverty, pray at least six hours a day and work in the community.

The Hoods offered to fly him home for vacations; he declined. They wrote letters; he didn't answer. They'd telephone; he couldn't talk. The faith they shared had, in a way, taken their son from them. The couple took it hard. "I don't believe it has to be either-or," said Jean. "I think you can be part of your family and still be part of a religious order."

Kara served as a bridge between Jason and his parents. She even traveled to Rome and spent three days living with nuns in a related order, to experience the kind of life Jason lived. Hood remembers Kara telling him, "You're talking like Jason has died. He's not dead. He happens to be following his dream in Rome."

On Mother's Day, 2001, four months after Kara's death, Jason was ordained a priest by Pope John Paul II. At the moment of their son's supreme accomplishment, Hood had to help Jean, overcome by both losses, up the aisle of St. Peter's Basilica.

"I was angry with God," said Jean Hood. "I felt like I had a covenant with God. I'd lived a good life and all I wanted was for God to protect my children."

They had to find a way to move on with their lives. Hood eventually turned to his parish in Cazenovia.

St. James Catholic Church had 'twinned' with a new parish in Thibeau, Haiti, through a U.S. Catholic group. Hood attended a few meetings of St. James' Haiti committee but grew impatient with the process.

"It takes too long to make a decision," he said. ³The way you learn things is you try something. If it doesn't work, you change direction."

No one from St. James had been to Haiti, so Hood set out on his own, leaving the Cazenovia committee's yard sales and lasagna dinners for Haiti's poverty and chaos. The Haitian pastor of St. Ives, Father Almyre, met Hood at an airport and drove him along dirt roads to a pasture – the future site of the new parish.

Hood became St. James' man on the ground in Haiti, reporting what he saw, financially supporting Almyre's vision and, with the freedom money gives him, trying his own ideas.

The Kara Hood Center, which sits alongside the rectory and a half-finished church, houses meetings, classes, performances and sometimes, Mass. Hood paid \$30,000 for the center. He's worked alongside men and women making cinder blocks, mixing and hauling wheelbarrows of concrete in 100-degree heat, engaged in his own spiritual alchemy. He's been to Haiti a dozen times in five years, a week or so at a time, and lately has been visiting more frequently.

"What touched me the first day I was here," Hood said, "is the people have a faith, a hope, I guess because they have nothing else, that puts us to shame."

When Hood 'retired' 12 years ago, he shifted his work focus, he says, leaving 'my secular work to devote my life to following Christ.'

But he didn't quit all secular business. He's since built a post office in Skaneateles and a dormitory, bookstore and restaurant complex in Cazenovia.

The start of his Cazenovia dormitory project was Common Grounds, a coffeehouse he built that is home to a teenage service organization and has become a community gathering place.

The coffeehouse lost money, and Hood subsidized it for years. He kept looking for ways to have it pay for itself, broadening its menu, making a bigger kitchen and adding more tables. Hood concluded the entire block needed an upgrade. Pretty soon, he had turned his project for teens into another \$2 million in commercial real estate.

Tongues wagged in Cazenovia.

"Some people who knew Bob Hood before said, 'Watch, this is what he's going to do'. And sure enough, he did it," said Willie Kiernan, who has worked with Hood at Common Grounds. His energy and drive can get him in trouble with boards and committees, too. "He gets on a board and he takes it over," said Kiernan. "People roll their eyes, because they're doing business as usual, and then Bob comes along, and it's never business-as-usual.'

They aren't rolling their eyes in Haiti. Not Colvin's adult literacy students, to whom he paid incentive stipends; not the local children for whom he pays school tuition; not local vendors, from whom he buys all their stock to give to the crowds that invariably gather to watch him.

In Haiti, Hood can steer things his way, flex his developer's muscles, see results and win appreciation.

Hood's one stipulation for the design of the Kara Hood Center was that it have a store, to create jobs and help develop business skills.

He loaned a group of women and men \$500 to start a business, buying things like beans and rice in bulk to repackage and sell. The store takes in several hundred dollars a week, saves local people a half-day trip to the nearest city and has spun off several other vendors who pack beans and rice on burros to sell farther into the countryside. The loan has been repaid.

To date, Hood has given St. Ives \$60,000, some of which helped build the walled rectory compound where he and other visitors stay. Outside the rectory at night, Father Almyre releases snarling dogs to stand guard.

In January, Hood brought Jean to Haiti for a dedication of the Kara Hood Center. It was her first time in Haiti, and it was difficult. Haiti's poverty reminded her of South Africa, where Kara had a deep, personal relationship with the poor.

"It wasn't her intent to improve their way of life,² Jean said. ³She admired that way of life."

As much as Jean appreciates her husband's work in Haiti, she doesn't feel a part of it.

"I think Bob certainly wants to be remembered for Haiti and the good he did, a lot more than he wants to be remembered for what he did in commercial real estate," she said.

Jean finds comfort in quiet solitude, in prayer. She's spent a lot of time at Christ the King Retreat House in DeWitt, where the director, the Rev. Michael Carmola, helped her through her anguish.

"If it wasn't for him, I might not still be alive," she said.

Out of her grief, she has forged a desire for a legacy of her own, her three surviving children and four grandchildren.

"I want my remaining children to not think I left them when Kara died, that I'm not just a broken person, never able to be happy again," she said. "They bring me much joy and happiness."

In their yin and yang partnership, Jean and Bob Hood have found common ground at Christ the King Retreat House, where in Kara's memory they donated a shaded grotto with a replica of Michelangelo's Pieta. The statue of Mary holding her crucified son moves them in different ways.

Jean sees in the face of Mary a look of wonderment, like "What happened? How did it come to this?"

Bob sees the statue and remembers how Kara cried whenever she saw the original in St. Peter's Basilica. Tears came easily to Kara, as they do to Hood.

She was no wallflower, either. After her death, her college friends shared stories about her zest for life.

"If there was a party with music, she'd be dancing on a chair," Hood said. "If people were on the chair, she'd be on the table. She had six pallbearers, all former boyfriends. Some were meeting each other for the first time."

In Haiti, Hood can be a part of Kara, connecting with the gregarious and intrepid spirit they shared.

One spring morning in Haiti, spirited singing and drum music drift from the church. Thirty people, women mostly, have walked the winding trails and dirt roads from their jungle homes for a late-morning evangelical service. The women wear summery dresses and hats, castoffs from American second-hand shops. They sing call-and-response songs that build in intensity and volume. They move and sway, raise their arms, holding Rosary beads high.

On the altar of an unfinished church, a healing dance of the spirit is under way. Hood is at the front of it, dancing with abandon.

Ruth Colvin: Spreading the power of the word from the Syracuse Post-Standard online

[Louder Than Words](#) By [Dave Tobin](#) Staff writer August 13, 2007 1:00AM

Ruth Colvin has been here before: face-to-face with adults who cannot read or write the language they speak, in some remote corner of the world where people on any given day just might get to eat a meal. It is April, and for the first time she has come to Haiti, where half the population can't read or write. She is taking on a job with impossible odds: launching an adult literacy program in a language she does not speak, with adult tutors who themselves are for the most part poorly educated.

Colvin's done this in Madagascar, in Papua New Guinea and in Guatemala. She's done literacy work in 26 of the 62 countries she's visited. Back home in Syracuse, she still tutors three Somali women in their native Af Maay, using an Af Maay literacy workbook she wrote herself. Eventually, she'll tutor them in English.

Forty-five years ago, she took on adult illiteracy in Syracuse and ultimately created Literacy Volunteers of America. With her husband's support, she eventually did for adult literacy what Julia Child did for cooking -- simplifying and democratizing a task that had been the realm of the professionally trained. Now at age 90, she has traveled from Syracuse to Haiti with four men -- two of them a reporter and photographer. She insists on wheeling her own travel bag.

The trip's last leg is a lurching 45-minute truck ride, 20 miles over a cratered moonscape of a dirt road, to St. Ives Roman Catholic parish in the village of Thibeau. As the truck pulls in, scores of school

children greet her with flowers and song, "Welcome Tant Ruth!" Nine prospective tutors and their nine students present her with a personalized straw hat with lavender sash.

"I just hope I can do enough for them," she says.

And then, "I can't say anything. I can only cry."

"I should have been a teacher," Colvin says the morning after the first long day of teaching.

When her Swedish-American father, Harry Johnson, died in 1929 at 38, she was 12, the eldest of five children. Johnson and his brothers ran a construction conglomerate in Chicago.

Colvin speaks reverentially about her mother, Lillian Johnson, who also wanted to be a teacher.

As an adolescent, Colvin practiced on her siblings. They would spin a globe and take turns putting a fingertip to it. Colvin would have them research the place in an encyclopedia and write a report.

"Someday you're going to go to that spot," she'd tell them.

Colvin wanted to attend a teachers college, but her uncle controlled the family's finances. He wouldn't pay for it, she says. Junior college was plenty. Four-year college was for her brothers. She studied business administration and made the best of it.

"I can take shorthand as fast as you can talk," she said.

She worked as a legal secretary and met Robert Colvin, a business administration student at Northwestern University. They married in 1940, moved to Seattle then Syracuse, where he built a lucrative sales and consulting career around industrial chemicals.

They raised two children. She led a Girl Scout troop and served as Bob's secretary at home.

It was through her church that she first learned of literacy work in overseas missions. She persuaded her church to donate money to a program in Zambia. "The perception was, there was no illiteracy in America," she said.

In 1962 she read that 11,000 adults in Syracuse could not read or write. She asked herself: "What am I going to do?"

In her 90s, Colvin accommodates her age. She loves golf and its exercise. Walking nine holes is difficult. So she walks four, playing two balls.

When she teaches in a new foreign country, she typically spends one year preparing and stays two to three months. Haiti would be different. Her husband Bob, 92, wouldn't make this trip. Only once in all her travels did she go without him. To cut down on their time apart, this time Colvin would squeeze her training into one week.

She was invited to Haiti by Bob Hood, a Cazenovia developer helping people in the rural village of Thibeau. Hood and members of St. James Roman Catholic Church in Cazenovia have "twinned" with St. Ives' parish in Thibeau. They've raised school tuition money for children and bought water purification systems for households there.

In Haiti kids die because their parents can't read. Unable to read instructions, Haitians misuse medications and don't maintain water purification systems. When those systems fail, children die from worms, parasites and diseases carried in bad water.

Hood and Colvin first met in November 2006. Hood had heard of her through a friend and was eager for her to start a literacy program in Thibeau. She agreed to come in April.

That would give her five months to write an 85-page literacy workbook in Creole -- a language she knew nothing about. That usually takes her a year.

Toiling with a Haitian Creole dictionary, she began teaching herself Creole fundamentals, crudely translating her standard literacy workbook into Creole, before she passed it by Haitian translators.

She bought her first laptop computer, so she could work while she and her husband vacationed in Florida for a month. Unexpectedly, she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom Dec. 16 (her 90th birthday), and that necessitated a trip to Washington, D.C.

While tireless, she knows how to enlist in her cause the people she meets.

She insisted that Hood find someone in Haiti to check the translation of her workbook and that he obtain the names, ages and family history of each tutor and student. He needed to bring pens, paper and reading glasses, she told him. He would carry her 50 pounds of books.

At the end of our first interview, I was issued 10 tote bags to pack in my luggage.

Before dinner the first night in Thibeau, the Rev. Joseph Almyre, the pastor of St. Ives', said grace.

People bowed their heads, folded their hands.

When he finished, Colvin asked if she could add something. She instructed the eight people around the table to join hands, left up, right down.

"You see?" she said. "I support him and he supports me. We're all in this together."

Twenty-eight hours after leaving Syracuse, Colvin stands in front of nine tutors seated at tables arranged in a "U." The tutors range in age from 21 to 43. Only two have jobs.

Outside on the dirt road, barefoot women leave the village well carrying on their heads five-gallon buckets of water. Children lug another gallon or two. Men lead bony cows and goats, and burros laden with bags of charcoal and sugar cane. Occasionally, a bike or motorcycle rider weaves around ruts. Colvin wears a pink cotton skirt, a white cotton shirt with flowers embroidered around the neckline, running shoes and a name tag, "Tant (Aunt) Ruth." Her straw hat sits on her table.

Students speak Creole, so two translators assist. Sister Gilda Hepburn from Jamaica, who runs an orphanage 20 miles away, speaks English and French. Reynold Joseph, who teaches at the same orphanage and is also taking Colvin's training, speaks French and Creole. Each of Colvin's points is relayed through Sister Gilda's French into Joseph's Creole.

She starts by describing qualities of effective teachers: Patient. Respectful. Creative. Know your subject. Enthusiastic. Committed to helping people.

Joseph begins to print Creole words in capital letters on the blackboard. "Lower case," Colvin tells him. Students need to see the same letters they will see in books.

She approaches each student, taking notes.

"Are you married?" she asks a man in his early 20s.

"No."

"So you're an eligible bachelor!" she says.

Giggles and laughter from around the table, as she breaks the ice and wins trust. She continues:

School experience? Work experience? And most important, what do you like to do?

Varied answers: I like to dance. I like to sing. I like to play football. I like to get water from the well.

Colvin's teaching strategy builds around a student's likes, what they know, their story. That one thing they are expert in, written down, becomes their first reading lesson. What could be more relevant or motivating? What better way to overcome an adult's embarrassment over not knowing how to read or write?

She was in her early 50s when she realized the power of building individual lessons around what's meaningful to students. She wrote about her personal experience, too.

She co-wrote and published her first book, "Tutor," in 1972. Revisions and other literacy books followed, including "In the Beginning was the Word," teaching literacy through the Bible.

Then came "For Ladies as New Golfers," a short treatise on the details and courtesies of golf, and "Great Traveling After 55," a collection of travel anecdotes, hints and checklists.

The writing is practical and encouraging. From the golf book: "Putting is the only area where, as a new golfer, you have a chance to tie or beat your husband or any other golfer."

Though personal, these books rarely reveal ego or introspection. She is guarded about private affairs and regarded personal questions for this story as torment.

For her family, she writes historical and autobiographical vignettes, passing along stories about her grandmother leaving Sweden for the United States, or relating what it was like when her daughter was born. She's written more than 200.

For six hours in a small, hot room, Haitian tutors listen to Colvin's philosophy. They watch and mimic her technique, as she encourages them. At day's end, she gives them composition books, pencils and sharpeners. She pumps her fist, triumphant.

"You have learned in one day what many people take a month to learn in a university," she says.

When she started, she had no teaching degree, knew nothing about teaching adult literacy. She trained, researched, networked and forged a national organization. When Literacy Volunteers of America merged with Laubach Literacy in 2002, it had 350 affiliates.

In the early 1980s, Colvin was speaking at a LVA conference in Virginia Beach. Judy Cheatham, a reading specialist from Kentucky, was there to learn how to remedy Kentucky's then-intractable school dropout rate and illiteracy problems.

"Can we reach everybody?" Cheatham recalls Colvin asking. "No. But we can reach them one at a time."

"Her slant on the problem was so pro-active, so solution-oriented, it completely changed the way I was thinking about literacy training," Cheatham said.

With the right approach and the persistent support of a tutor, nearly anyone can become literate in ways that will profoundly improve his or her life, Colvin told them.

The literacy half of her life coincided with her husband's retirement. They'd travel together for months at a time, often building trips around their volunteer work -- hers with literacy, his helping business people through the International Executive Service Corps.

On extended trips they relied on each other to the point of cutting each other's hair, and found ways to include their grandchildren. When they reached their teens, each grandchild could spend three weeks with the Colvins somewhere in the world.

She remains open to discovery and adventure. In Haiti, Colvin prodded Father Almyre, the Haitian priest, to take her to a walled voodoo temple. It was the first time he had ever set foot in one.

"If you stop learning, you might as well die," she said.

The Haitian literacy students range in age from 12 to 44. None can write his or her name.

Through all her foreign literacy teaching, Colvin had never witnessed the moment when new tutors begin working with students. But on the second day in Haiti, tutors and students are working in pairs around the rectory compound. She nods and smiles as tutors recite the same Creole syllables she stressed, even repeat the same gestures she used. It all looks so good.

Her plan is this: Before she leaves Haiti, tutors and students will work together four hours over three days. She'll meet tutors once more to debrief and evaluate. After she leaves, tutors will spend at least 60 hours with their students over six months. Ideally, she'll return to teach the four best tutors how to train tutors. A self-sustaining, model literacy program will be in place, and she'll have worked herself out of a job.

To motivate students and tutors, she insists Hood pay incentive stipends for each workbook section they complete. Students receive \$2.50, tutors \$5.

Two days after the first meeting, Colvin sits in the audience at a community talent show. Some of Colvin's students perform a skit about illiteracy. They hold up workbooks that Colvin wrote, tell how life will be different because of the training. When the skit ends, they look to Colvin.

"Thank you. Thank you, Tant Ruth," they say.

On the day when tutors return for final exam, reality hits. Haitian schooling is built upon rote repetition. Completing school usually means the U.S. equivalent of 6th or 7th grade.

Progress reports from tutors are more bleak than Colvin expected. Some students progressed. Most really struggled. One 37-year-old student could not understand distinct syllables or the concept of individual words.

Then comes the written exam, a simple test essentially given twice. Colvin asks tutors all the exam questions before the exam.

"Will you have respect for your students?" she asks.

She expects a yes or a no. Instead, tutors parrot back her question.

Crestfallen but determined, she simplifies and repeats the first day's lessons. What she witnessed those first days was not the teaching performances of adults who understood. It was the execution of memorized routines.

Maybe she can get four of the nine to successfully tutor, she says during a break. Joseph, the Haitian translator, reassures her that everyone is teachable. At another time in her life, such a sentiment might have consoled.

"I don't have 10 years to do it," she says. "I'm looking for success."

When she returned to Syracuse, Colvin wrote a dispassionate six-page report of her Haitian mission.

Given the poor state of Haiti's education system, if only two of the nine illiterate students completed her workbook, the trip would be a "BIG success," she wrote. She plans to return to Haiti next year to continue training tutors.

That's how it goes with Colvin. Two students in Haiti would join hundreds of thousands of others whose lives had changed because of her. Others might walk away. She wasn't giving up. She'd be back.

"If you believe in your idea, you go from there," she said. "If you do it with love, it will work out."