

New York's Toussaint Scholars Send Congratulations to Namesakes in Haiti

By **RON LAJOIE**

While the Class of 2013 in the Archdiocese of New York was celebrating graduation ceremonies in late May and early June, the graduating class of College Pierre Toussaint still had a few weeks to go.

But it will be an historic day, indeed, when graduates of the school in Sassièr, rural southwestern Haiti, line up to receive their diplomas June 23. It will be the school's first graduating class, with some 20 Grade 13 students and 40 Grade 12 students picking up their diplomas.

College Pierre Toussaint has strong ties to the Archdiocese of New York. Not only does it take its name from the Venerable Haitian-born, 19th century New Yorker interred in the crypt under the altar at St. Patrick's Cathedral, but the archdiocese's Office of Black Ministry helps to support the school, which opened in September 2006 with a seventh-grade class. The school has added a grade each subsequent year to Grade 13, which under the Haitian education system is the grade that must be attained to advance to university. Grade 12 students graduate to other colleges.

To mark the occasion, the archdiocese's own Pierre Toussaint Scholars have been sending congratulations to the graduates of their namesake school. Established in 1983 by the archdiocese through its Office of Black Ministry, the Pierre Toussaint Scholarship Fund provides annual support and mentorship to college student-leaders of diverse backgrounds, who are graduates of public, private and parochial high schools, and active members of parishes in the archdiocese.

"I thought it would be a good idea to connect the College Pierre Toussaint with the scholars here," explained Leah Dixon, the scholarship program's coordinator and adviser. Ms. Dixon invited Yves Filius, a former Toussaint scholar, who is of Haitian background and who had visited the college, to address the current scholars on their winter break.

"He came back and spoke to the students about his experience in visiting College Pierre Toussaint and so that kind of brought it to life, the students

there and the families, that whole thing," she said. "The students (here) organized a fund-raising event with the proceeds going to College Pierre Toussaint." The scholars raised some \$3,000 for the school through a charitable website. They personalized the gift by writing their own congratulatory notes to their fellow students in Haiti.

"Congratulations on your graduation! I know it took a great amount of effort and sacrifice but your hard work and dedication has definitely paid off. Continue striving to succeed because through God anything is possible," wrote Trevin Smith, a student at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, class of 2016.

Clarisa Gonzalez, Class of 2016, City College of New York, wrote: "For the first graduating class, I want to congratulate each and every one of you. Getting this far takes a lot of hard work and dedication, which all of you have shown you have. May the Lord bless you all and help, as well, the returning students, in all your future endeavors."

Brother Tyrone Davis, C.F.C., executive director of the archdiocesan Office of Black Ministry, will be part

of a delegation going to Sassièr from New York for the historic graduation in late June.

"This is so significant for this community I find it kind of hard to wrap my mind around it," Brother Davis told CNY. "When it started it was only about 56 students in grade seven. Now there are over 300 in grades seven through 13. From that poor community where most folks cannot read or write, where six or seven years ago they had no secondary school, they now have a corps of young people who can go on

PROUD GRADUATES—

Below, Grade 12 and 13 graduating students of College Pierre Toussaint gather in front of their school in rural Sassièr, Haiti. The school, which opened in 2006, will graduate its first senior class in late June. The graduates will be able to go on to college, a rarity in rural Haiti. Right, a view of the courtyard of the secondary school.



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