

# HOPE speaks in HAITI

After adopting a child, family immerses themselves in the underprivileged Caribbean community

**W**e're going to adopt a boy from Haiti" were words junior Addie Allen had never imagined her parents would say, but those were the exact words that would change her life forever. Allen and her brother and sister found out they would be welcoming a 2-year-old brother named Comerson into their family. But about a year later, Allen felt like her life had never been any different.

Allen's parents informed her and her siblings about how the adoption agency had found Comerson when he was 3 months old in a dumpster. He was HIV positive, had tuberculosis and other issues that he probably would not have been able to live through had he stayed in Haiti.

"I was shocked to hear that something that terrible still existed in the world," Allen said, "and I was happy to be doing something that could help."

At first little Comerson was alarmed by his new family and home, and because it was like nothing he had ever experienced before, he was shy and reserved. He was unable to talk to Allen or her siblings due to the language barrier and his being unfamiliar with his new setting. But he quickly adjusted and began to talk to them despite the language difference, and after a year he could fully understand and speak English. Other dramatic transformations included his recovery from most of his physical disabilities. When he first came to the Allen family, Comerson had very little hair and a huge stomach — because of the malnutrition he suffered from for most of his life — but a year later, he had a full head of hair and was back to a healthy weight.

"Comerson has become very smart, outgoing, energetic and a huge attention-seeker," Allen said. "I can't believe we've already had him for a year."

When the family initially traveled to meet Comerson, it was their first trip to Haiti, and Allen said it changed their lives forever. Her dad, Coburn Allen, who was a pediatrician for 14 years with additional training in pediatric infectious diseases and pediatric emergency medicine, realized how little medical care there was and how much help was needed in Haiti. He had wanted to start medical clinics in other parts of the world for a long time and felt that he was being called to do something to provide his experience to help people who needed it.

"I was super stoked about my dad starting the clinic because I knew he had been wanting to get involved abroad for quite some

time," Allen said, "and I was so happy for him to get the chance to do that."

The Allens then got involved with an organization called My Life Speaks, which provided an education for those in Haiti with special needs. Voodoo beliefs in Haiti influenced the people into considering those with special needs to be cursed and were often sacrificed in voodoo temples to rid the cultures of their "evil" presence. The organization helped to get rid of those beliefs and inform Haitians that people with special needs are just like everyone else.

"The special ed problem in Haiti breaks my heart," Allen said. "It also surprises me that it doesn't get much coverage in the media. It's weird to me how something so terrible and common goes so unnoticed to the rest of the world."

Not long after deciding to adopt her little brother, Allen's dad opened his own clinic in Haiti. He researched what he wanted to do and where he could do it so that it would be as beneficial as possible and ended up finding a place right next to the central My Life Speaks location. The clinic would be a site for doctors to teach Haitians how to properly medicate patients, and after providing the required equipment, they could become self-sufficient without reliance on America. The goal was to have Haiti grow on its own.

"After the clinic opened, people no longer ignored their medical problems," Allen said. "People now have hope that when they get sick, they can now get better."

During the opening of the clinic and their increased involvement with My Life Speaks, Allen and her family formed new relationships. They started welcoming mission trips and internships to help improve their clinic and spread the word of My Life Speaks by working for the nurses and helping teach the kids. The volunteers came from all over the state: groups sent by their church in Austin and their old church in Houston, friends from school and even students from her dad's UT classes.

With the clinic creating a solid, beneficial presence, Allen visited Haiti at least two times a year. Even though she was not old enough to intern, she loved to go and hang out with her new Haitian friends, as well as to love on the children there who didn't get that very often. Allen also fell in love with the culture and learned to speak Haitian so she could communicate with everyone and even took French at Westlake, which instilled in her a newfound appreciation for learning new languages. After being immersed into this unfamiliar culture, Allen had a new outlook on life.

"The whole experience has been very eye-opening," Allen said. "You don't realize how fortunate you are until you see people that literally have nothing. It changes your perspective on things."