



Louino Robillard Talks About the Youth Environmental Grants

The Pollination Project grants to the Youth Environmental Hub is so important because it helps us to reach young people who have so often left out of the conversation when it comes to social change. I grew up in Cite Soleil, Haiti's biggest ghetto, and knew what it felt like to be a young person with visions and dreams that society didn't see or respect. It always seemed like outsiders with more power than me got to make all of the decisions – government, international non-profits, the United Nations. I managed to overcome that and mobilize other young people like me to form a social movement in my community where we worked to transform our neighborhoods with what we had. And we did this with a series of small but important pushes from people who understood us, who gave us advice and very modest resources when we would hit a wall that we couldn't climb on our own. When the odds were so stacked against us, when we were exhausted and discouraged and out of ideas, someone would come along and give us just enough of a push to restart our batteries and get us going again.

That's when I realized how much it is important to support young people as they are growing into leaders. As someone now with a decade of community change experience, I have seen enough to know how to mobilize people and resources, when to be patient and when to push. But I see so many young people with so much promise who don't yet have that kind of perspective, who want to become leaders but are hitting the many walls that Haitian society puts in their path – stigma, violence, poverty, political instability. Without support, they get discouraged, and even cynical. I've seen young people whose dreams of changing Haiti turn into dreams of getting out of Haiti, and it pains me to see our best and brightest beaten down like this.

So I've dedicated myself to trying to build up young leaders. I founded the Cite Soleil Peace Prize to recognize emerging young leaders in Haiti's ghettos working for peace, I founded a community park in

the countryside (Pak nan Ginen) where young people can learn how to become environmental stewards, and I became a TPP Environmental Youth Hub Fellow, thanks to the support of the Levi Foundation. This has allowed me to do what I know is necessary: identify young leaders who want to make a change, mentor them, and provide them with that first financial push to help them start their engines.

Given that this is such an important opportunity, I've been careful to select the young people I know will benefit the most. Like Samuel Cadet, a young leader in Bwa Nef, a neighborhood on the outskirts of Cite Soleil, Haiti's biggest ghetto, who was already working to turn an abandoned, trash-infected piece of land into a flourishing urban garden. He had done all of the first steps with his own energy and local contributions and established a small garden, but he was beginning to get discouraged. I had him partner with Winter Luc, another young person running a community school in his neighborhood, to develop an initiative that would expand the urban garden and teach Winter's students hands-on lessons about plants, nature, and the environment.

If there is anyone more marginalized in Cite Soleil than young men, it is young women. Because of the gang violence in the area, Cite Soleil is defined by machismo and young women are left on the sidelines. So I identified Jesula, a young woman who volunteers at a youth center called SAKALA, which uses sports and arts and gardening to teach peace and coexistence. She had just learned about vertical gardening, a technique to cultivate food and recycle food waste that is ideal for dense urban areas like Cite Soleil. She was so excited about what she learned that she wanted to share this idea with other women across the community. I worked with her to develop this into a TPP proposal, and she felt so validated that her ideas were not only listened to, but that someone would be willing to invest in them.

Haiti's rural and mountainous communities are also isolated and marginalized in their own ways. So I looked for young people who were looking for initiatives that bridge rural and urban Haiti, and leveraged youth energy to tackle environmental problems. I have so far found two young people who show this promise: the first is Elson Auquel, a bright young student in Port au Prince who is working with a youth group in his rural hometown to develop a sort of summer camp/exchange program to help rural youth reconnect with their land, learn sustainable farming techniques, and plan for the future of their community. The other is Paulinx Louis, an impressive young person who is helping his rural hometown to launch a massive reforestation campaign.

This is important for so many reasons. Haiti has so many development projects, but they are often dictated by external priorities and run through formal organizations. Many young people are not part of formal organizations, or if they are, they are not recognized as leaders, so they feel shut out of these systems. TPP's Flow Fund structure allows us to cut past all of the bureaucracy and red tape and reach young people directly. Not only that, but we listen to *their* ideas, help them develop *their* initiatives, and invest in *their* dreams. That is the most important thing: we are validating these young people as actual leaders with our trust, our time, and our small investments. Haiti's problems are so entrenched they will take generations to solve – outsiders have been trying to solve Haiti's environmental issues for decades to little effect. It will take young people who have faith in themselves and the future to commit themselves to Haiti's environment over the course of a lifetime. And TPP, with the support of Levi Strauss and Co, is helping to start them down this path.