

Volunteer faces uphill battle ministering to Haitian migrants

By Teresa A. Parsons

Something about Jean Despeines speaks of a weariness and resignation older than his 30 years.

Since October, 1983, he has followed fellow Haitians in their migrants' trek across the eastern United States, as they harvest tomatoes, oranges, peaches, and locally, the fruit of upstate apple orchards. To this migrant community, which fluctuates from 5,000 in Olmstead to a low of 400 in Sodus, he is minister, advocate, educator and friend.

Despeines is weary because outside Florida he is alone in these roles. Rarely is his ministry supported by local residents, whose attitudes he describes as "careless."

"They don't even know that migrants are there, and when they do, they're not too interested," he said. "One priest called me last week and said a Haitian migrant came to him for help. He wanted to know if I would help the man."

His primary task is to respond to the migrants' spiritual needs, but Despeines finds it impossible to distance himself from the other aspects of their lives.

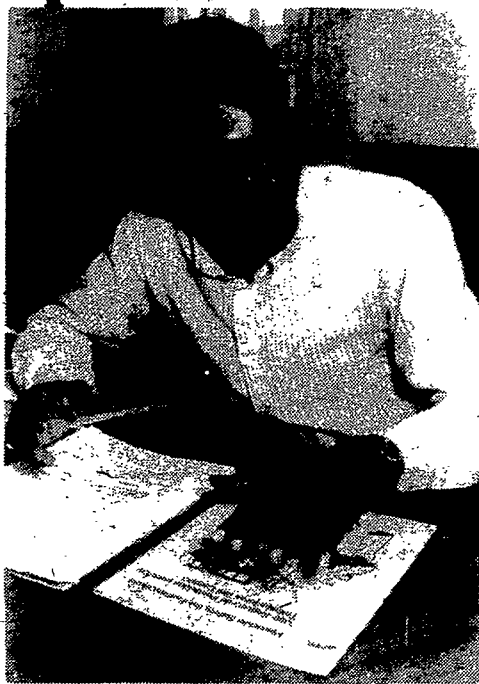
"I act like a minister, even though I'm not one, because they have no one else," he said. "But they need more than just to share the Good News. Sometimes I feel ridiculous, reading to them from a book, telling them to do this or that when they need so many things."

The only child of "a very poor family," Despeines came to the United States from Haiti in October, 1983. His physician had recommended taking a break from his seminary studies after he had surgery for an ulcer.

In Miami, Despeines volunteered at the Haitian Catholic Center, a branch of the United States Catholic Conference, which advocates for the rights of Haitian refugees. His present ministry is sponsored by that organization as well as the Finger Lakes Office of Social Ministry, the diocesan Division of Urban Services and Office of Social Ministry.

Although he came to the United States for a break, Despeines' work is hardly restful. During a typical week, he might be asked to help migrants with transportation, language barriers or money and clothing shortages.

Beyond reacting to their immediate needs,



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal
Jean Despeines

Despeines encourages his countrymen to learn English and to improve their job skills with vocational training. He also tries to advise the migrants on more complicated problems facing them, from legal issues to health care. A stack of books and pamphlets on farmworkers' rights guaranteed by state and federal law and precautions workers should take to protect themselves from pesticides are his resources.

The latter guide may be the most important as well as the most futile. Many migrants appear to be suffering from skin and respiratory ailments as a result of pesticide exposure, Despeines said. Less visible are the chemicals' possible carcinogenic and mutagenic effects.

The guidebook recommends that migrants shower or bathe each evening after work. But some camps provide only enough hot water for a few showers. Others provide no showers nor even hot water. Despeines has even seen camps where, in order to bathe, the migrant would need to haul water from an outside well or tap and heat the water on a stove. After spending a back-breaking, 12-hour day in the fields, even the most cautious

person might be tempted to forego such a chore.

Local parish and community support is critical to Despeines' efforts, but instead of help he often encounters suspicion, not only from farmers and local townspeople, but even from the migrants.

Farmers fear that by teaching the migrants their rights, Despeines will encourage them to rebel. The Haitians, on the other hand, come from a background of intimidation and oppression.

"In Haiti, people are afraid of everybody," Despeines said. "They think anybody is a spy who may betray them from the government or the Ton-ton Macoutes (secret police). The only institution they trust is the Church because it's the only force in the country to do something for poor people."

In the United States, the Haitian migrant's fear is compounded by confusion over his immigration status and the threat of being deported.

More than 300,000 Haitians are now estimated to be living in this country amid a bewildering array of immigration categories and designations. Most of them came to the United States in the boat lifts of 1978-81. President Ronald Reagan virtually brought a halt to that influx in 1982 by implementing a number of tough measures, including giving the Coast Guard permission to shoot the refugees if necessary to repel them.

Some 1,200 Haitians already in the country were rounded up and placed in detention centers for 18 months. They were released only after a federal court ruled that the government's action was illegal and discriminatory. Members of this group are now considered parolees, and their cases are being decided by the courts.

An unknown number of Haitians are undocumented and presumably illegal. Between 30-50,000 Haitians who arrived before 1980 are considered "entrants." They may be granted permanent residence status by the immigration service, but their requests have been pending since 1978.

Most of the Haitian migrants are men with families still in Haiti. "They left by boat, not by family," Despeines said, explaining that the men were fleeing desperately poor and oppressive conditions.

With an annual per-capita income of \$260 and an 80 percent illiteracy rate, Haiti is believed to be the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. The average wage for

those who have jobs, Despeines said, is \$2.50 per day.

"When they (Haitians) hear that the minimum wage in the United States is \$3.35 per hour, they say 'You must be a rich man,'" he said ruefully. "There is no future for young people in Haiti, even when they have good educations. There are only extremes of rich and poor."

Although his manner is typically mild, Despeines' voice and gestures grow impassioned on the subject of United States aid to the government of Haiti's "president for life," Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier. The president succeeded his father, Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier, who ruled the country from 1957 until his death in 1971.

"The State Department says that conditions have been ameliorated in Haiti, but that is not true. If anything, conditions have grown worse for the poor there," Despeines said of his observations from a visit last April. "The United States sends \$53 millions of dollars a year, but the people never see a penny."

"I don't wish to have a communist country," he added, "but pretty soon there won't be any choice. The United States is giving the communists a perfect opportunity."

He is also angered by the immigration service's discrimination against Haitian refugees, whose chances of gaining asylum are extremely slim. One reason they are so seldom granted asylum is that they are fleeing a government supported by the United States, Despeines asserted.

Immigration procedure is complex, and to many migrants, an illegal "business" marriage to gain citizenship appears a simpler solution. What a Haitian usually doesn't foresee is that he is vulnerable to blackmail and other abuse from his American "spouse." By threatening to report him to immigration officials, the spouse may force a migrant to support her entire household in addition to paying for the marriage and divorce.

By a similar ploy, the migrants are often victimized by field bosses, who pay those without immigration papers sub-minimum wage and pocket the rest of their earnings.

Many refugees came to this country expecting to return to Haiti when conditions improved there. But little has changed in six years, so they continue to trek up and down the east coast, seeking work and sending

Continued on Page 10

CONGRATULATIONS **HAPPY BIRTHDAY** **HAPPY ANNIVERSARY**

Let the Courier-Journal help you wish your family, friends and relatives a Happy Birthday or Anniversary, or extend congratulations for Graduation, a Job Promotion, or whatever occasion you may be celebrating.

Just send a photo (recent, or from days-gone-by), and a few special words you would like us to print for you (30 word limit). The cost is \$25.00

Send all material to:
The Courier-Journal
 114 S. Union St.
 Rochester, N.Y. 14607

The Courier-Journal will return all photos if accompanied with a self-addressed, stamped envelope, but cannot be responsible for photos damaged through the mail.

"INDISPENSABLE!"

1986 Catholic Almanac

"Ideal. . . . Not enough good things can be said about this indispensable volume."
 — NATIONAL CATHOLIC NEWS SERVICE

"A too-little-appreciated treasure of the Catholic Church in the U.S. Every priest should have one! Every Catholic family should have one. It's a gem."
 — Msgr. John P. Foley

"An excellent and indispensable tool."
 — CALVINIST CONTACT

Year after year, critics around the world hail the *Catholic Almanac* as an "indispensable source" of basic information and concise articles on virtually every subject of Catholic interest — from Biblical studies to current events.

Sold out every year! Don't miss out on this newest edition of a Catholic classic — order now!

1986 Catholic Almanac
 No. 256 sturdy Roncote cover, \$13.95
The Courier-Journal
 114 So. Union St.
 Rochester, New York 14607

The 1986 Catholic Almanac is also available at
Logos, Covenant & Trants Bookstores in Rochester

Make checks payable to the Courier-Journal
 Please send the following order to me:
 _____ copy(ies), No. 256, **1986 Catholic Almanac**, @ \$13.95

Name _____
 Address _____
 City _____
 State/Zip _____

Payment must accompany order.