

SIUE International Student Gives Back and Fosters Success through HAITI-ED

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EDWARDSVILLE – “Do not let circumstances dictate your future.” Southern Illinois University Edwardsville international graduate student Westenor Valmera hasn’t just taken that phrase to heart, he’s using it to inspire and support Haitian children through a non-profit and scholarship program he created.

Valmera launched HAITI-ED: Haitians for Advancing and Improving the Impact of Educational Development in 2017, and has grown the non-profit into a successful endeavor that provides school supplies to Haitian children in need and helps them grow both personally and professionally.

In its first year, the organization donated 24 backpacks with school supplies. Since then, an outpouring of support for HAITI-ED’s efforts has developed, allowing Valmera and his team of other young Haitian professionals to provide backpacks filled with school supplies to 218 kids in 2019.

The backpacks are collected in the U.S. and filled with supplies purchased in Haiti, as a way to support local businesses. In 2019, Valmera notes that HAITI-ED received strong donor support from the SIUE community, as well as two Haitian businesses, including Boukanye Restaurant and HAICOM Cellulaire.

“As life conditions were not toward my advantages nor preferences before traveling to the United States, I told myself I that I do not need to be wealthy to help make an impact in my home community,” Valmera said. “I have chosen to cast down any negative mindset, and have had the willingness and patience to be in control of my destiny by dedicating myself to community service. HAITI-ED has daily made a million dollar smile on my face, because it has become my passion.”

Valmera has expanded the organization’s team to ensure efficiency and broaden its reach. His team of 12 young Haitians, some of whom are studying in the U.S., believe in being part of the change they want to see in their community.

Valmera first came to the United States upon graduating from high school in Cap-Haitien, Haiti and earning a competitive Scholarship for Education and Economic Development (SEED).

“The SEED program is an exchange initiative that provides U.S.-based technical training to youth and community leaders, enabling them to become important players in key development sectors of their home countries,” Valmera explained. “I was among the 28 candidates selected from Haiti, out of hundreds of applicants.”

After achieving a degree from Saint Louis Community College – Florissant Valley, Valmera earned a bachelor’s in political science from SIUE in summer 2018. He is now

pursuing a master's in public administration at SIUE and is slated to graduate in fall 2019.

"SIUE has not only provided me needed knowledge, but also a place to grow and have a second family," said Valmera, who has been "adopted" during his time at SIUE by Ed Hersherberger, PhD, chair of the Department of Management and Marketing, and his wife, Allison. Valmera also credits retired Saint Louis University professor Cecil Thomas, along with Thomas' wife and family, for supporting him financially along his journey at SIUE.

"Dr. Hersherberger always tells me not to let circumstances dictate my future," Valmera said. "That is incentive for me to create new things and work on new projects with my team members."

In 2018, Valmera created a second program under the HAITI-ED organization: the Young Achievers Scholarship. The program pays full tuition for Haitian children who obtain the highest grade.

"HAITI-ED has provided 30 scholarships to kids from several localities in the northern part of Haiti, and most of our donors were from SIUE," Valmera explained. "The remaining donors were other young Haitians, some of whom are HAITI-ED members."

"My experience at SIUE has been overwhelmed with joy, and the University has played a major role in my success," he added. "It provides resources and opportunities for international students to get a good career and help make an impact in their country."

Valmera aspires to help educate children in Haiti and find ways to establish a sustainable program to help Haitians living in poverty. His goal is to obtain a doctorate in political science, with a focus on international relations.

"I want everyone, and mainly young people in Haiti, to understand that the future of our country is in our hands, so they should do something good now for their community," he said. "Follow your dreams and be a barrier breaker!"

For more information on how to contribute to HAITI-ED's efforts, contact Valmera at wvalmer@siue.edu.

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communities better places to live. Situated on 2,660 acres of beautiful woodland atop the bluffs overlooking the natural beauty of the Mississippi River's rich bottomland and only a short drive from downtown St. Louis, the SIUE campus is home to a diverse student body of more than 13,000.