

Charlemont man helps rebuild Haiti from the grass roots up

By Ellen Eller

CHARLEMONT—On Saturday, Jan. 29, Andy Mueller left the snows of Massachusetts behind and returned to the tropical valleys of Haiti.

He has spent most of his time there since last November, having finally convinced “influential people” that it is possible to build “long-term sustainable housing” for a nation devastated and demoralized by the January 2010 earthquake and the storms, health crises and hardships that followed.

Mueller, an architect/builder specializing in “green” construction, founded the Greenspace Collaborative in 1996 to link natural-building architects and designers around the U.S. and Canada with people who want comfortable, healthy, environmentally efficient and benign homes. In 2009, he joined the nonprofit Sheltering Pine Institute (S.P.I.), an organization that helps communities in need access research and practical ideas that enable them to maintain environmental sustainability and foster social justice.

In March 2010, Mueller was part of an S.P.I. team on a “re-connaissance mission” to Haiti, assessing needs and potential resources. Team members went back to the drawing board, he said, put together an “intellectual” proposal that won over those influential people and initiated the Ti Kay Pay Project last year in collaboration with Builders Without Borders and a Haitian organization called

Grassroots United.

S.P.I. is not connected with the relief efforts of Presidents Clinton and Bush, Mueller said when asked, adding, “Clinton has done a good job, but there’s too much red tape.”

He cited problems with coordination, distribution, money and supplies held up by customs and an unstable Haitian government.

“Bureaucracy doesn’t move things forward,” he said. “We made the decision not to work from the top down, but from the bottom up.”

S.P.I. designed and is building natural homes that are earthquake and hurricane resistant — houses that can be built “by Haitians, for Haitians” using affordable construction materials found locally. The prototype is a “culturally appropriate design” based on a type of house common in rural areas, the Ti Kay, a two-room structure with an attached “galri,” or veranda/porch. The galri, traditionally an important part of a Haitian home, provides protection from sun and rain so that people can go about their daily routines outdoors.

To empower an impoverished nation

“The main thrust of this project is to train trainers,” Mueller said.

S.P.I. employed two local men, Jean Louis Elie and Annio Baptiste, to work with the team and learn the Ti Kay Pay building process “from foundation to



Photo by Martin Hammer

Andy Mueller of Charlemont is again in Haiti, helping teach residents how to take extraneous rice straw and use it to build houses. People on the earthquake-torn island continue to struggle to recover their economic footing and many remain homeless.

roof” so they’ll be able to teach other Haitians to build sustainable homes.

As local people become involved learning how to build safe homes for themselves, they also develop new skills, stimulating community industry and creating jobs by using available resources.

On an island that is virtually without trees, S.P.I.’s solution for sustainable building material has been to use items other

people considered useless.

Discarded wooden pallets that previously held supplies sent to Haiti from abroad are taken apart and made into roof trusses and frames for the Ti Kay houses, often braced with bamboo supports. Although the earthquake destroyed a number of the island’s bamboo plantations, there is a campaign to increase plantings and develop an industry based on this strong, fast-growing plant for

construction.

For foundations, Ti Kay Pay houses use crushed rubble retrieved from buildings that collapsed in the earthquake. (S.P.I. and one of its partners, the Ecological Building Network, purchased a manually operated rubble crusher to break down larger stones.) As an alternative, gravel bags made from tarps found throughout the earthquake-affected region are cut and sewn to the proper size by local seamstresses, then filled with readily available crushed limestone.

But the key to Ti Kay Pay construction is bales of rice straw — much smaller than the hay bales seen in New England and made without machinery since, as Mueller said, Haiti has no baling machines.

There are places on the island where farmers raise two or three crops of rice each year and burn unwanted straw left over after harvest, polluting the air in the process.

Instead of letting that straw go to waste, S.P.I. members created compression molds, showed local people how to use them to make bales and then how to stack the brick-like bales to make walls.

Sealing interior walls with a plaster made from the clay-rich local soil and painting a lime-plaster coating on the exterior walls offers an effective finish while at the same time drawing on a Haitian tradition of daubing the walls of houses with the island’s abundant clay. As an interesting sidelight, the Ti Kay Pay project has sparked efforts to revive the island’s old lime kilns.

Each house builds pride and hope

As with all its projects, Sheltering Pine Institute’s work in Haiti focuses on the involve-

ment of people who live in the communities where new homes are being built. That collaboration allows for the development of appropriate solutions to problems that are not merely handed to the local population, but owned by them.

“We must envision a future where the diversity of nature and the dignity of the human being are simultaneously protected,” the S.P.I. Web site notes. “It is a recognized human right to have clean water, to have a healthy environment. This right includes not just protecting human needs but the needs of the natural world. The Sheltering Pine Institute is committed to becoming a resource center to help our communities have access to the research and practical ideas that will fuel our solutions to the dual challenges of environmental sustainability and social justice.”

Before leaving again for Haiti, Mueller shared part of a recent S.P.I. team interview conducted by CBC Radio-Canada. When asked whether it took an earthquake to change people’s ideas about how to build in Haiti, Jean Louis Elie responded, “If we had this kind of house, less people would have died.”

After just five days of working on the Ti Kay Pay Project he said, “When people see the construction, then they really accept it . . . because it’s ours. The straw is ours. We make it, we live in it; it’s no problem.”

Donations are urgently needed to support educational demonstration projects in straw-bale construction for Haitian people. To contribute or to learn more about this and other natural building projects, shelteringpineinstitute.org, grassrootsunited.org or greenspacecollaborative.com.

Big Banks Behaving Badly?

The events of the past few years clearly illustrate that there is a huge difference between the big banks and local banks, such as Florence Savings Bank. First, there was the sub-prime debacle. Then, the big banks received massive federal bailouts. Next, they began a wave of aggressive foreclosure actions. And now, these banks have instituted high fees on checking accounts and other services. One of these big banks is even charging customers for the privilege of speaking to a teller! What will they think of next?

The question I ask is: When is enough, enough? How much worse does it have to be to get all customers to switch to local banking? Over the past few years, Florence Savings Bank has gained thousands of customers who have fled the big banks. These customers tell us they made the switch because of poor service, high fees, and the strong armed tactics the banks employed. Yet, for some reason, there are people who still do business with these big banks. Why?

Today, thanks to advances in technology, you can bank from anywhere in the world with Florence Savings Bank. We offer all of the services you can get at a big bank, just without the high fees. In fact, we offer our customers not just one free checking account, but a choice of three free checking accounts including features that let you earn high interest or iTunes downloads, and refunds of ATM transaction fees, nationwide. We also offer a basic free checking account and a free checking account for our commercial customers.

An important difference between the local banks and the big banks is their effect on the local economy. Big banks take capital out of

the local region; local banks, such as Florence Savings Bank, keep reinvesting the money right here. In the past our regional banks used to keep capital in New England. Remember Shawmut Bank? Or SIS? Or Bank of Boston? Or BayBank? Or Fleet Bank? All gone! In fact, today, as a result of the financial feeding frenzy of bank mergers during the past fifteen years, there is not one major regional bank based in our New England area.



“Today, thanks to advances in technology, you can bank from anywhere in the world with Florence Savings Bank.”

Florence Savings Bank is still here—a local bank. Our mission since our founding in 1873, has been to provide the residents and businesses of our area with access to the financial resources they need, and to provide sound banking advice. We focus on customer service, not mergers. We create accounts that provide valuable services and convenience, not fees. We support the local community, because it is our community.

I invite anyone who is still banking at a big bank to switch to Florence Savings Bank. I promise that you will be welcomed with outstanding customer service and be offered accounts that can either save or even earn you money, all while keeping your dollars in the local economy.

To switch to local and better banking today, stop into any one of our nine offices or go to our website at www.florencesavings.com. Let us show you how great it is to bank with a local bank.

Sincerely,

John F. Heaps
John F. Heaps, President

Mark assigned to three committees

SHELBURNE—State Rep. Paul Mark has received assignments to three committees for this legislative session, including Higher Education, Mental Health and Substance Abuse and the Joint Committee on Environment, Natural Resources and Agriculture.

Mark says that he had hoped for a spot on the Agriculture Committee, given the large number of farms in his district. That Committee covers a wide range of issues from preservation of farmland and open space to water and air quality.

“This is a tremendous platform to help farmers of all stripes in my district and throughout the Commonwealth,” he said.

Noting that education made him the elected leader he is today, Mark welcomed his appointment to the Committee on Higher Education. Mark earned five college degrees while working full-time as a pay-phone repairman, including two degrees at Massachusetts state schools.

“I’ve already met with chancellors and presidents of several local colleges and they’re understandably concerned about the budget,” he said. “It may be a tough year for higher ed. I’m going to work with colleagues on keeping our colleges academically top-notch and financially affordable.” Service on the Committee on Mental Health and Substance Abuse, Mark said, will be “a new subject” for him.

“I’ll be looking to the veteran lawmakers for mentorship and studying hard,” he said. “But I welcome any opportunity to make a positive impact in the lives of real people.”

Altogether, Mark is pleased with the scope of his legislative work for the upcoming session.

“Now that everyone’s bills are filed, it’s time to get to the nitty-gritty of seeing what’s feasible and what’s not,” he said.

Mark’s staff is present here Mondays in Shelburne’s Memorial Hall from 9 a.m.-12 p.m.



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