

Karen Telleen-Lawton: Destined for Grace

Two young women from Carpinteria put their nonprofit to work on behalf of Haitian children

Rebecca Costa and Lindsey Connolly, who both grew up in Carpinteria, founded Destined for Grace, a nonprofit dedicated to easing burdens facing Haitian children. (Destined for Grace courtesy photo)

By [Karen Telleen-Lawton](#), [Noozhawk Columnist](#) | Published on 09.21.2010

Most of us can claim to have been idealistic in our youth, edging into realism a few minutes into our first job. Rebecca Costa and Lindsey Connolly, who both grew up in Carpinteria, have translated their youthful idealism into a working nonprofit. They are dedicated to alleviating the social burdens Haitian children face, by getting them off the streets and into classrooms.

“We searched for an already existing nonprofit working in Haiti,” said Connolly, a recent [Westmont College](#) graduate. “It was very difficult to find an organization that led volunteer groups there. After countless attempts to find people to travel with, we decided to take groups ourselves and begin our own nonprofit.”

Costa, a [California Lutheran University](#) graduate, visited Haiti first on a trip with a Valencia church. Despite the island nation’s reputation as the Western Hemisphere’s poorest country, she fell in love with the island and Haitians. When she and Connolly founded [Destined for Grace](#), they had little but their enthusiasm and energy, both of which proved essential.

Two years later, the young women have led three trips to Haiti; established two local thrift stores, at 929 Linden Ave. in Carpinteria and 720 Milpas St. in Santa Barbara; provided countless suitcases of food, clothing and medical supplies to an orphanage in Mirebalais; purchased land; and contracted to run a school for local orphans and other children.

“They are gung-ho, going after their dreams,” said Alice Birch, who traveled on their most recent trip in July. “The first couple of days I was overwhelmed by the noises and the people. But these girls run into a wall, bounce off, then get up and go again. I can’t wait to go back.”

As a nurse, Birch said she was particularly interested in touring a teaching hospital set up by Paul Farmer’s group, [Partners in Health](#).

“I didn’t want to get too excited about going there because the plans were always changing,” she said.

But on the third day, they bounced down the road for about two hours in Haiti’s mountainous, jungle-rich Central Plateau. Stone gates “in the middle of nowhere” marked the hospital for people in the poorest part of the poorest part of the country.

“They have maternity, surgery, HIV, psychiatric and dental programs,” Birch said. “They are so organized. They make their own nourishing food for the patients and even grind their own peanuts.”

On the final day of the weeklong trip, Connolly and Costa met with a group of farmers and a notary to sign papers and present funds to

purchase 3½ cowels of land. This was a task that seemed perfunctory when they planned the trip but impossible after the first day.

“It was much more difficult than we thought,” Costa said. “When we arrived, one of the beautiful mango trees on the property had been chopped down (by an unhappy prospective buyer). The plans unraveled from there.”

Halfway through the week they felt defeated, but they persevered and finally were able to purchase most of what they wanted. They hope to provide sustainable agriculture for the school.

Westmont professor Chris Milner partnered with Birch on the trip. She had brought several groups of students to Guatemala, but this was different.

“I was humbled to watch Lindsay and Becca, with their wonderful dreams and plans, working so hard to see them unfold,” Milner said. “How much we learned from them! They were the teachers, and we the students.”

— *Karen Telleen-Lawton's column is a mélange of observations supporting sustainability. Graze her writing and excerpts from Canyon Voices: The Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon at www.CanyonVoices.com.*