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Graffiti for change in Haiti



A Haitian graffiti artist hired by Caritas has completed a number of murals and will be painting several more throughout the city. The murals depict messages reinforcing hand washing and good hygiene practices.

Credits: MathildeMagnier/Caritas

By Mathilde Magnier

Graffiti artist Jerry has been covering the walls of Haiti's relief camps with his works of art. His objective is to encourage the Haitians to apply basic hygiene principles.

"I am spraying for change. It is my mission to talk to the Haitian people," says Jerry. He has a spray can in his hand and is looking at a wall he is covering with colorful graffiti.

In the blazing sun, the young street artist's forehead is covered with sweat. Restless, he is drawing one grinning character after another, all of them with impeccable clean hands, on the surrounding wall of the relief camp in Nazon. 5,000 people have found shelter in this camp since the earthquake.

In this remote site where humanitarian aid has barely started to arrive, people are curious and enthusiastic about the artist's performance.

"It's Jerry, it's him, it's Jerry, that is what he looks like!" they whisper.

Jerry Rosember is famous in Port-au-Prince. For one year, with a mask and a cap hiding his face, he has been covering the capital's walls with his drawings during the night. His graffiti is sometimes humorous and often cartoonish, but it always has a deeper meaning.

Over the months, the artist became a local legend, who even became well-known abroad. Many will remember his Michael Jackson portraits, on the front page of the New York times the day after the pop star's death.

"There are many problems, many people are suffering in Haiti. I am not trying to get involved in politics saying "Vote for this person" or "Get rid of that candidate". I create funny pictures about social topics to help the Haitians," says Jerry, his eyes looking serious under his rapper cap.

Since the earthquake, Jerry is convinced that it is "his obligation to do more for the population". Without hesitating, he decided to give up his cover and to start creating graffiti for the hygiene campaign Caritas launched in Port-au-Prince's camps.

The message is simple, but essential. Haitian's awareness on hygiene questions is raised and they are encouraged to wash their hands regularly. The main objective is to prevent infectious diseases and other epidemics that could spread in the overpopulated camps during the rainy season.

During the last weeks, the displaced families have seen more and more of Jerry's characters on the walls of sanitary structures and surrounding walls. With the help of Mr Fresh the rocker and Mrs. Victor, the local toilet lady, the artist gets across the message "lavemen nou" (Let's wash our hands) and insists on basic hygiene principles.

"With an artist like Jerry, we can transmit messages of primary importance in a simple, playful and much more effective way than with the usual posters or flyers. His funny and cheeky drawings appeal to everybody, above all young people and those who can't read," says Ross Tomlinson, in charge of water and sewage for Caritas.



And it works. The initiative has been received with great interest by the displaced. They are happy that someone cares about their situation and are glad that their walls are brightened up by the artist's pictures.

"I like the way he works. I like the way he get his message across," says Bobby Lacroix, who lives in Bureau des mines, one of the three camps Jerry has already worked in.

"With these pictures, we pay even more attention to washing our hands. Besides, if it's Jerry who says so...", says a young boy.

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