

A Hero for Haiti: Jean-Michel Voltaire '03

By Thomas Adcock



Jean-Michel Voltaire '03 is a middle-class family man with a home in suburban Washington, D.C., and a job as a trial attorney with the U.S. Justice Department. Life is good; life is secure. But it was not always so.

Voltaire arrived in the United States in 1994 seeking political asylum from the violent chaos of his homeland, Haiti. He was 18 years old, penniless, jobless, a speaker of Haitian Creole and French, but unable to navigate English.

In less than 10 years, Voltaire earned a GED from the New York public school system—while attending ESL classes and working in a factory and as a supermarket security guard—followed by a bachelor's degree from New York City College of Technology and a J.D. from New York Law School, where he graduated, *magna cum laude*, in 2003.

The decade was not without bumps in the road. On applying to New York City Tech, for instance, Voltaire failed the English proficiency tests. In order to qualify for admission, he enrolled in a three-month total immersion English course—five hours daily, five days a week. Ultimately, he graduated New York City Tech with a near-perfect grade point average.

Voltaire's odyssey, about which he is notably modest, constitutes a "true American dream," according to his mentor, New York Law School Professor Lenni B. Benson.

Today the odyssey continues. In addition to advocating on behalf of the U.S. Justice Department, Voltaire oversees Réunion Sportive d'Haiti (Sports Assemblies of Haiti), a fast-growing, Washington-based nonprofit organization

he created to assist a place he has never forgotten—the impoverished southern coast of Haiti. Launched in 2010, the program provides aid and services to Haitians affected by the devastating earthquake that hit in January of that year.

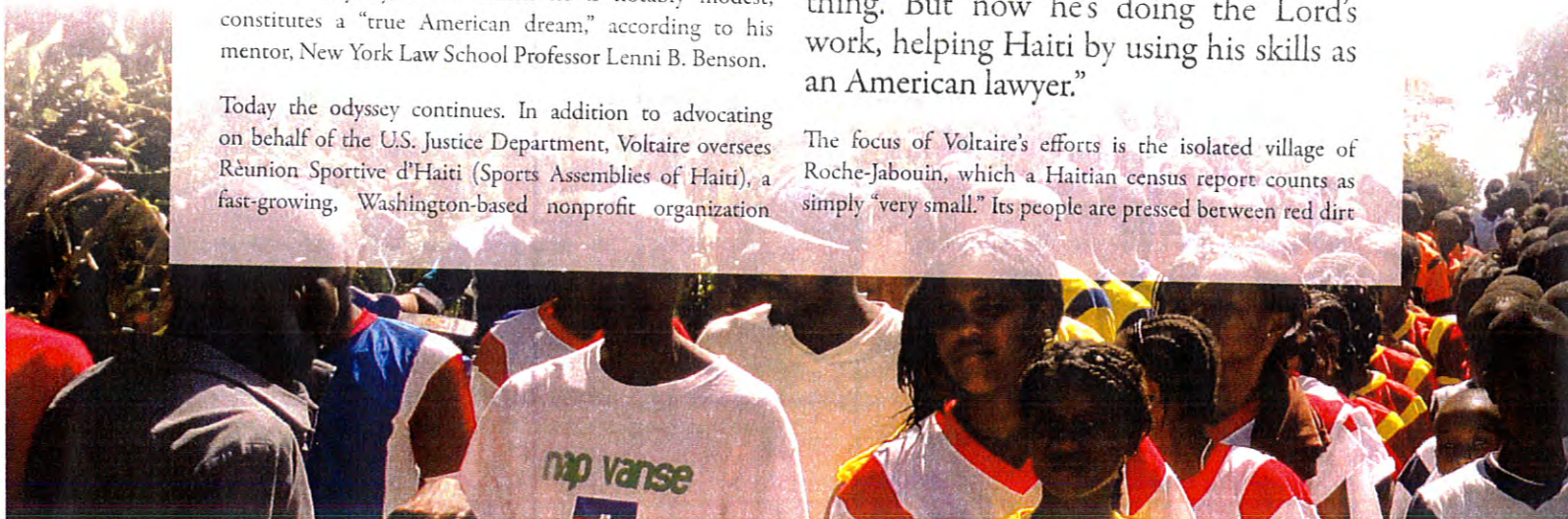
Voltaire knows the benefits of aid programs firsthand. He fled Haiti with assistance from the International Organization for Migration, an agency of the United Nations, during what he calls the "scary time" for Haiti: the aftermath of a right-wing coup d'état that toppled the democratic government of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 1991. Although Voltaire managed to leave in '94, the Haitian dictatorship would not permit his parents to accompany him. (Years later, his mother was granted leave to the U.S., but his father died prior to receiving an exit visa.)

Spending every spare moment between working hours in the Brooklyn Public Library, Voltaire prepared himself for an American education by studying English translations of the classic French writers his mother encouraged him to read—Rousseau and Montesquieu, and his namesake Voltaire, née François-Marie Arouet.

He sent nearly a quarter of his wages to his parents and siblings in Haiti. Inspired by his grandfather, a carpenter whose wisdom was sought by villagers in need of counsel, Voltaire nurtured a dream of becoming a lawyer and made it come true.

"Here's a guy who always gave back to his country of origin," says Dean Emeritus Richard A. Matasar, who recently visited with Voltaire in Washington. "He was always sending back money. That's one thing. But now he's doing the Lord's work, helping Haiti by using his skills as an American lawyer."

The focus of Voltaire's efforts is the isolated village of Roche-Jabouin, which a Haitian census report counts as simply "very small." Its people are pressed between red dirt



mountains and the open sea, dependent on subsistence farming and drinking water from a communal well vulnerable to hurricane-related contamination. Voltaire was born there 40 years ago, one of 10 children—six of whom now reside in the U.S.

As a boy, Voltaire rose at five o'clock in the morning on school days to set out from home by six, on foot. This allowed sufficient time to traverse unstable roads and claim a seat in class by eight sharp—or else he'd be turned away in favor of a prompt student. Each school day involved walking three miles, round trip, usually barefoot to ensure that shoes would last the year.

"The distance was challenging, and the roads were rocky," says Voltaire. "If there were winds off the mountains, we got very dirty. We had to wash ourselves in the river before class."

He recalls, "There was a requirement to go to church every Sunday. You had to get that church [attendance] card punched. If you didn't go to church, you couldn't go to school. I couldn't stay home. My mother wouldn't allow that. She said education was the key to a good life. I tell my son all this. He laughs, and says, 'Wow!'"

Were it not for R union, today's boys and girls of Roche-Jabouin would likely grow up to tell their own children of similar hardship. But through alignment with the Maryland-based National Organization for the Advancement of Haitians, R union has expanded from the immediate purpose of providing soccer leagues for otherwise idle youth to a portfolio of social services critical to a region of Haiti ill-prepared for the mass influx of earthquake refugees from hard-hit Port-au-Prince—refugees with little choice but to return to the countryside.

This year, R union's projects include a youth essay contest, construction of wells and sanitary latrine facilities, and youth leadership programs. One other project is dear to Voltaire's heart: in association with Foundation Digicel of Haiti, R union opened an elementary school in Roche-Jabouin. The walk to class is now measured in minutes rather than miles.

Voltaire has visited the school he would love to have attended as a boy. He returns to Haiti at least three times yearly. His most recent trip was in late February, when Voltaire and partners from other public service agencies met to finalize plans for the construction of a clinic in Roche-Jabouin that will provide much-needed basic medical services, including pre-natal care and immunizations.

Of her prot g  and friend, Professor Benson recalls, "Even early in law school, he could demonstrate effective presentation of complex materials, skills that usually require a few years' practical experience. As I got to know Jean-Michel better, I was struck by his modesty and generosity to others."

The professor believed public service was the natural place for her idealistic student, and accordingly steered him to the Attorney General's Honors Program and his eventual career with the Justice Department. He now works at the trial and appellate levels on cases that include constitutional challenges to federal statutes and representing the U.S. in litigation against foreign governments and diplomats.

"I came to the United States because this is a country where democracy and freedom, the most cherished ideals of humanity, are birthrights," says Voltaire. "These are the ideals that every human being should strive for."

Of his own decade of striving, he says, "People tell me it's unbelievable. Extraordinary? Maybe, but not as difficult as some people would think. The difference between the possible and the impossible depends on your point of view, and keeping your priorities straight."

Among the Haitian diaspora, there is great importance attached to helping people back home. In Haitian Creole, the expression is *M'ap vini*, meaning "I will be back." As will Jean-Michel Voltaire, again and again. 