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Plumber's pipe dream made reality in Haiti



by Mary Wilson, mwilson@jcadvocate.com

Timing is everything. In life, we make time to do the things we love, when we can. For Jeff Morgan, taking the trip of his dreams just took a little patience, and time. Earlier this year, Morgan stepped away from his successful plumbing business and entered into retirement. But, he's not the kind of guy to just sit around waste away the minutes, days or weeks he's been afforded.

Morgan believes that if you have a dream, and you say it out loud, you can make it happen. That's exactly what he did. A few years ago, Morgan voiced his desire to travel to a third-world country to make what little bit of difference he could in a different part of the world. Being a social-media guru (he has been to "Facebookland," as he calls it, and worked with their small business professionals), he saw a post from the Plumbers Without Borders organization.

"They shared a Build Health International (BHI) post about what they were doing in Haiti," said Morgan. "I thought, 'well, that would be really neat.' So, I got on BHI's website, filled out some paperwork, but I didn't turn it in. It was all filled out; I just had to push one more button."

While Morgan felt compelled to do it, he said he also felt a little scared. In February of this year, as he was leaving the office for the last time, a coworker told him he should go ahead and volunteer.

“He said, ‘why don’t you just go ahead and go to Haiti and do that work like you talked about,’” said Morgan. “So, after he left the office and I was boxing away the rest of my stuff, I pushed the button.”

Morgan put the thought in the back of his mind. It wasn’t until 6-8 weeks after he sent in his paperwork that he received an email. He then went through an interview-type process, where he spoke with folks from every spectrum of the BHI organization. The executive director of the organization owned a mechanical company, sold it, and took the proceeds to start BHI.

“Our stories were so similar,” said Morgan. “We had something in common.”

Having not worked with his hands in over a decade, and not worked any new construction for quite some time, Morgan was a little surprised to discover BHI thought he was a good match for their organization.

“I couldn’t even tell you how long it’s been since I’ve done that stuff,” said Morgan. “But, I can direct, and lead, and teach. So, that’s what I thought they would have me do.”

He scheduled an appointment to get current on all of his shots, and once those were complete, BHI started throwing some dates out to him.

“The very week that I was supposed to go, the hurricane came,” said Morgan. “I didn’t know how soon they would reschedule me, or how that even worked. But just before Halloween, they wrote me back and said they were ready.”

The timing worked for Morgan, and he flew to Miami where he met a representative from BHI whom he would travel with to Haiti.

“I was, literally, the last person on the plane to Haiti,” said Morgan. “I was charging my phone until the last possible minute. I wanted to make sure I was at 100%; I didn’t know what it was going to be like when I got there, you know?”

Once they landed in Haiti, Morgan was instructed to “do what I do” from his guide.

“It was absolutely berserk,” said Morgan. “There were animals everywhere. It was like nothing I had ever seen before.”

Hearing people speaking in Creole, Morgan said he definitely felt as though he was in a foreign land. With barbed-wire surrounding the first jobsite (a security measure), Morgan was escorted through and saw a security guard with a sawed-off shotgun.

“I respected him right away,” said Morgan. “That’s when it got a little bit scary. Not of getting shot or anything like that, I was scared because I knew that I couldn’t turn the channel.”

He then felt this new strength and armored himself with a shell to somewhat compartmentalize what he had stepped into.

“Something just came over me,” said Morgan. “You’re here; you have to get through this. That’s what I kept telling myself. Enjoy it. Do what you’re supposed to do; be what you’re supposed to be.”

Some equipment came to take back with them. Throwing the tailgate down on a truck, Morgan immediately started hauling the tools onto the bed. It was then that he said the others could tell he was there to work.

“And, man, they tested that,” said Morgan. “I dug a ditch. I did gas piping. I had to get all the equipment myself, having to go find it and work with whatever I found.”

While in Haiti, he felt a sense of overwhelming pride and humility. Many towns don't have electricity, and some only have it during certain times. With no running water, the Haitians get their water from wells. Orphans earn their keep as indentured servants.

Morgan got back to his plumbing roots while he was in Haiti. The first week, he did a job that took up most of a day (which, he said he would expect his guys back home to finish before lunchtime). The second week, armed with a pick and a shovel, two apprentices and Morgan dug a ditch for a water line.

“This kid dug this ditch, 85 feet long, 2 feet deep, all day long, with flip flops on,” said Morgan. “I was just in admiration of the kid.”

He bonded with the boys. Later that week, the one in flip flops had gotten a pair of tennis shoes. At the end of the week, right before his return home, Morgan knew the bigger of the two would fit into his boots.

“I gave him my boots. I gave him my pants and a couple shirts,” said Morgan. “The other one wouldn't have fit into any of my stuff; he was kind of little. The company, Morgan Miller Plumbing, had given me a care package. It was all wrapped a bandana. That thing was my savior while I was there, it was the best tool I had. So, on the last day, I gave the smaller of the two boys my bandana.”

On his way out of Haiti, Morgan's transportation returned to the jobsite for gas and oil. He noticed that all the young men were lined up waiting for their job assignments for the day. Rolling down his window, Morgan looked to see if he could spot the two boys, thinking they'd be in line and he'd see his bandana.

“There he was. He's got my freaking bandana on his head,” said Morgan. He raised his fist out the window. The boy spotted him, and raised his fist in the air as the car drove out of sight. “It was awesome. I didn't know if I'd ever see him again.”

Coming home after his two-week adventure, Morgan knew he was forever changed.

“All I could think about the whole way home was, ‘who am I going to be?’ I can't complain about anything ever again,” said Morgan. “I don't know what to do with this knowledge. I'm still, a month later, walking around in a daze. I'm not the same, I'm just not. And it's a magical feeling.”

The impact the trip made on Morgan's life is profound. He's unsure of what the future holds, though it seems as though the inherent need he has to lend a hand may lead him to other parts of the world and other people who are struggling.

“Facebook does this; it takes you all around the world and leads you to all kinds of paths that you would have never gone down otherwise,” said Morgan. “I've got the time. I've got the energy. Why not help where I can and when I can? That's what it's all about.”

Posted by *Mary Wilson* at **9:28 AM**

