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Plumbing

## How A Retired Plumber Ended Up in Haiti

Jeff Morgan, Morgan Miller Plumbing's founder, follows a lifelong dream to plumb abroad.

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Sarah Cimarusti No Comments

A year before Jeff Morgan, 57, planned to step down and retire as the owner of Morgan Miller Plumbing, he stumbled upon a shared Facebook post from Plumbers Without Borders and Build Health International about volunteer efforts in Haiti.

Morgan has dedicated his life to building passion for the plumbing trade and creating a dynamite work family with strong values and a deep commitment to community. Like many retirees who wonder "What's next?" Morgan began to think outside his corner of the world in Grandview, Missouri.

Both organizations are building a global database of volunteers in the plumbing and mechanical trades. Volunteers work on projects that provide access to safe water and sanitation to resource-deprived areas all over the world.

It was Morgan Miller's CEO Stella Crewse who first approached Morgan about his retirement plans, and encouraged him to follow his dream of volunteering abroad.

"Traveling the world and helping people has been one of my dreams for a long time," Morgan says.

Morgan filled out an application with BHI, an organization that designs, builds and equips high-quality, sustainable healthcare facilities in impoverished regions of the world. BHI followed up with Morgan's request within 30 days.

During the interview process, Morgan was asked various questions about his health, skills and readiness to participate in a project that would operate way outside his comfort zone and lifestyle he was accustomed to at home. He also had a lot of questions of his own regarding safety and the work of the organization. After a series of extensive interviews, Morgan coordinated several weeks worth of doctors' visits to meet the physical requirements of the trip.

### Off to Haiti.

Morgan traveled to Haiti in October 2016, shortly after Hurricane Matthew hit and killed almost 600 people and caused \$1.9 billion in damage, making it the nation's worst disaster since a 2010 earthquake. The devastation had a huge impact on travel.

"They had no real infrastructure," Morgan explains. "It took us three hours to get 60 miles because there were virtually no roads."

Haiti brought Morgan back to his plumbing roots. It had been years since Morgan plumbed, but he was appointed to oversee and instruct a local crew that would install an piping system for an infectious disease center. Morgan ran into several obstacles and had to rework his understanding of time, travel and the ideal jobsite.

“The first week I was in Haiti, I accomplished very little,” he explains. “My biggest accomplishment was getting to and from the jobsite.”

The second week in Haiti, Morgan and two apprentices dug a ditch for a water line using picks and shovels.

“They were just ecstatic,” Morgan says. “If I would have done the same amount of work in the same amount of time back home in Kansas City, I would have been upset.”

Communication was another obstacle Morgan encountered on the jobsite. He used Google Translator to speak with Haitian laborers who spoke in Haitian Creole.

Then there was the tool issue. Although Morgan had brought his own hand tools with him, the Haitian laborers used tools that were worn out or without power. All materials were donated. There are a few plumbing shops in Haiti, and it could take up to two days to deliver materials.

“If you don’t have what you need for one component of the project, you have to work on something else,” Morgan explains. “You can’t just run over to Home Depot or the supply shop and get what you need. A lot of times you have to think outside the box.”

Safety was not among Morgan’s top concerns. The village Morgan worked in had no police department, but he felt comfortable with his hosts, a tight-knit group of people who “take care of each other.” What’s more, Morgan explains, individuals who come to Haiti to volunteer are highly regarded among villagers.

“You don’t know what you don’t know,” Morgan says. “Almost every conversation I had with a Haitian ended in a hug.”

Understanding and respecting a completely different way of life was Morgan’s prime objective in Haiti.

“During my first trip in Haiti, I learned how to behave,” Morgan says. “I wanted to be respectful of their traditions and their way of living.”

### **Back again.**

One time in Haiti wasn’t enough. Morgan describes it as “something that gets in your blood.” In May 2017, Morgan was assigned to work on another infectious disease center, this time working from the ground up. He oversaw a crew of six men. Morgan and the men worked with the tools and materials they had and in extreme heat.

“It’s amazing what the laborers can do,” Morgan explains. “Two men built an 85-foot long ditch with a pick and shovel with sandals on. They didn’t move fast – sunshine in Haiti is a whole different level of sun – but they never quit.”

Morgan looks back fondly on the camaraderie he established with his crew.

“One day I was standing under this tree, and everyone started laughing at me,” he recalls. A bunch of mangoes had fallen down all around me. It was mango season, so when they fell, the laborers would stop what they were doing and scoop up the mangoes. They’d either save them for dinner or hide them from each other. It was quite a game.”

He adds: “Everyone wants what you and I want. To be happy, live a good life, and have a good family, and maybe have a little fun along the way.”

Morgan became very close to his team. Two laborers in particular went above and beyond on the jobsite. “They both showed up early when I did,” he said. “Jean stuck out pretty quickly. He showed the aptitude for the work.”

Morgan was thrilled to hear later that Jean had went onto plumbing school and is starting his own business. It’s stories like Jean’s and others’ in Haiti that have since transformed Morgan’s life.

“We have it made in America,” Morgan says. “Plumbing is important, and without it, the modern world wouldn’t exist. My

father was a plumber. He used to tell me, ‘Learn the trade, Jeff, and then you can go plumb anywhere in the world.’”

He adds: “And then there I was, this plumber guy from Kansas City, Missouri, standing in the middle of a jungle in Haiti. I felt very fortunate. These trips have taught me that I can do a lot more than I’ve allowed myself. As long as I have my mental faculties and physical abilities, I will help. It makes me happy.”

Morgan remains involved in both Plumbers Without Borders and Build Health International, and plans to travel to Haiti again.

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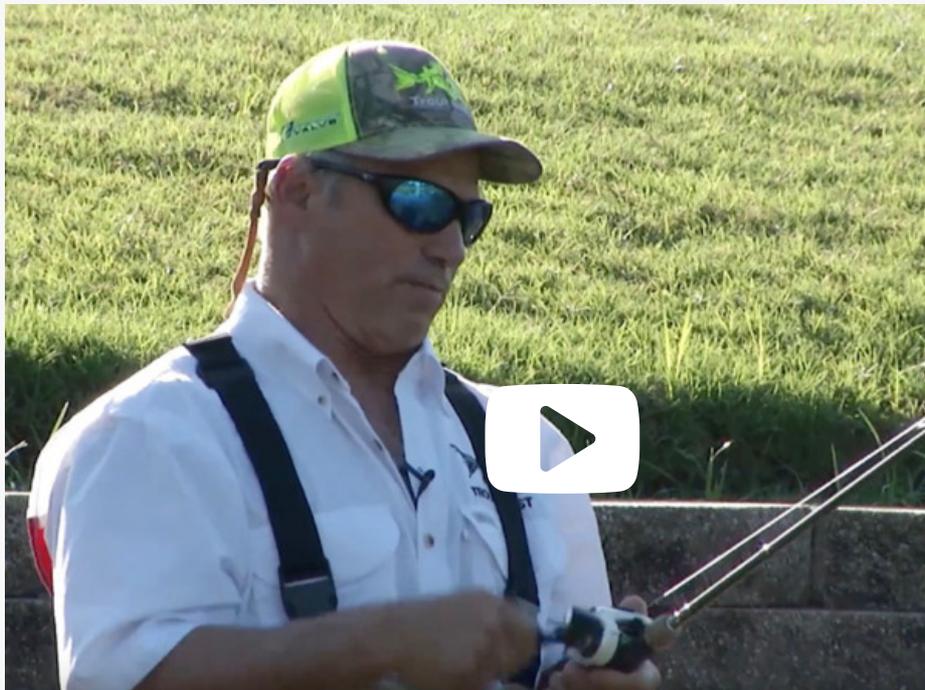
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