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Arborloo constructed at user's home. Photo credit: Gigi Pomerantz

Imagine you don't have a toilet. You wake up in the morning and, at your back door, you wonder, "Where can I take care of my personal business today?" Your two children get out of their beds and join you, saying, "Where shall we poop?" Regardless of the size of your yard, you want to ensure no one steps in today's feces. Suddenly, your pet dog runs in. There's an odor that accompanies him. You realize he stepped in the leavings of last night and brought them inside.

About 2.5 billion people, or one-third of the world's population, defecate in the open or use the flying toilet — excrement-filled plastic bags thrown into road ditches or trash piles. You need a healthy alternative, personally and environmentally.

Lack of appropriate sanitation contributes to the death of a child every 2 ½ minutes from preventable diarrheal diseases, according to the United Nations. It impacts other vulnerable populations — persons with disabilities and women, who are more exposed to sexual violence. Lack of private toilets in schools is a major reason why girls don't continue their education once they enter puberty. In developing countries, poor sanitation results in economic losses from people who are unable to work due to illness.

Now brace yourself. The number of people in some areas of rural Haiti who don't have access to proper sanitation, is one of the world's highest — 8 out of every 10 people.

Youth Haiti, an American-based nonprofit organization working in Duchity in the Grand Anse region of Haiti, has emphasized the elimination of human feces from the local water supply since 2008. It develops ecological projects in sanitation and water-source protection, community gardening and reforestation and focuses on Haitian young people. It also did the survey to determine their area's lack of sanitary facilities.

Gigi Pomerantz, the founder of Youth Haiti, is a guru of ecological sanitation. A nurse practitioner, she initially visited Duchity with a medical team. During a needs assessment with local health-care leadership, she noted that poor sanitation was the cause of a significant number of illnesses. "Everyone was treated for worms," she said, "and many suffered from chronic diarrhea."

Gigi returned to Wisconsin and began Youth Haiti to concentrate on ecological ways to manage sanitation. She understood the Haitian farming families' preference for private, old-fashioned flush toilets — they're everyone's favorite. Unfortunately, accessibility and unit cost, lack of access to water and methods to hold the effluent make them often impossible to install. It forces most Haitians in the countryside to turn to a latrine for their family's needs.

Even then, a latrine is not easy for a rural farmer to deal with. What do you do when the pit beneath it fills? Would you be willing to bring the cost down by sharing a latrine with other families? And how about trying something new and different? You have options like:

- A dry toilet, where urine and feces are separated and stored separately.
- An arborloo, a shallow-pit-composting latrine, surrounded by a privacy screen and anchored to a concrete platform.
- A bucket toilet, a 5-gallon bucket with a toilet seat on top.

Enter Community-Led Total Sanitation

Community-Led Total Sanitation (CLTS) was the support process that convinced rural families to accept those new ideas. In 2000, overseas development officials in Bangladesh recognized that providing toilets didn't guarantee use nor result in improved sanitation. CLTS developed a proven system with which the entire community ended, at once, open defecation.

Gigi is a determined hands-on administrator. She personally tested the viability of a bucket toilet on the day I met her in late 2010. In the bathroom of her ranch-style house, the normal porcelain throne was on the right. To the left sat the bucket toilet. She declared, "I used it this morning" and opened the seat to show me.

It seemed rude not to look. Without stepping closer, I craned my head outward. I saw only a layer of dried leaves at the bottom of the bucket. There was nothing yucky to see, nothing to smell — due to the composting process, which Gigi was about to show me.

Gigi grabbed the wire handle of the bucket, the white plastic type that hardware stores sell for \$4.99. I followed her into the cold Milwaukee winter to a corner of her backyard. Under an evergreen were three piles — one of dried brush, one of frozen green leaves, and one covered in straw. This last one was the compost.

The waste plus oxygen encourages anaerobic bacteria to grow and reproduce. The microorganisms eventually break down the waste, which controls the smell. Gigi was intent on taking the process one step further — to produce disease-free, nutrient-rich composted soil for agriculture and reforestation. "It needs to reach a temperature of 160 degrees Fahrenheit," she said, "to kill cholera and roundworms." She pushed back the straw and extended her hand a couple of inches above the compost. Even in 10 degrees, the mound was hot from the microorganisms breaking down the plant material.

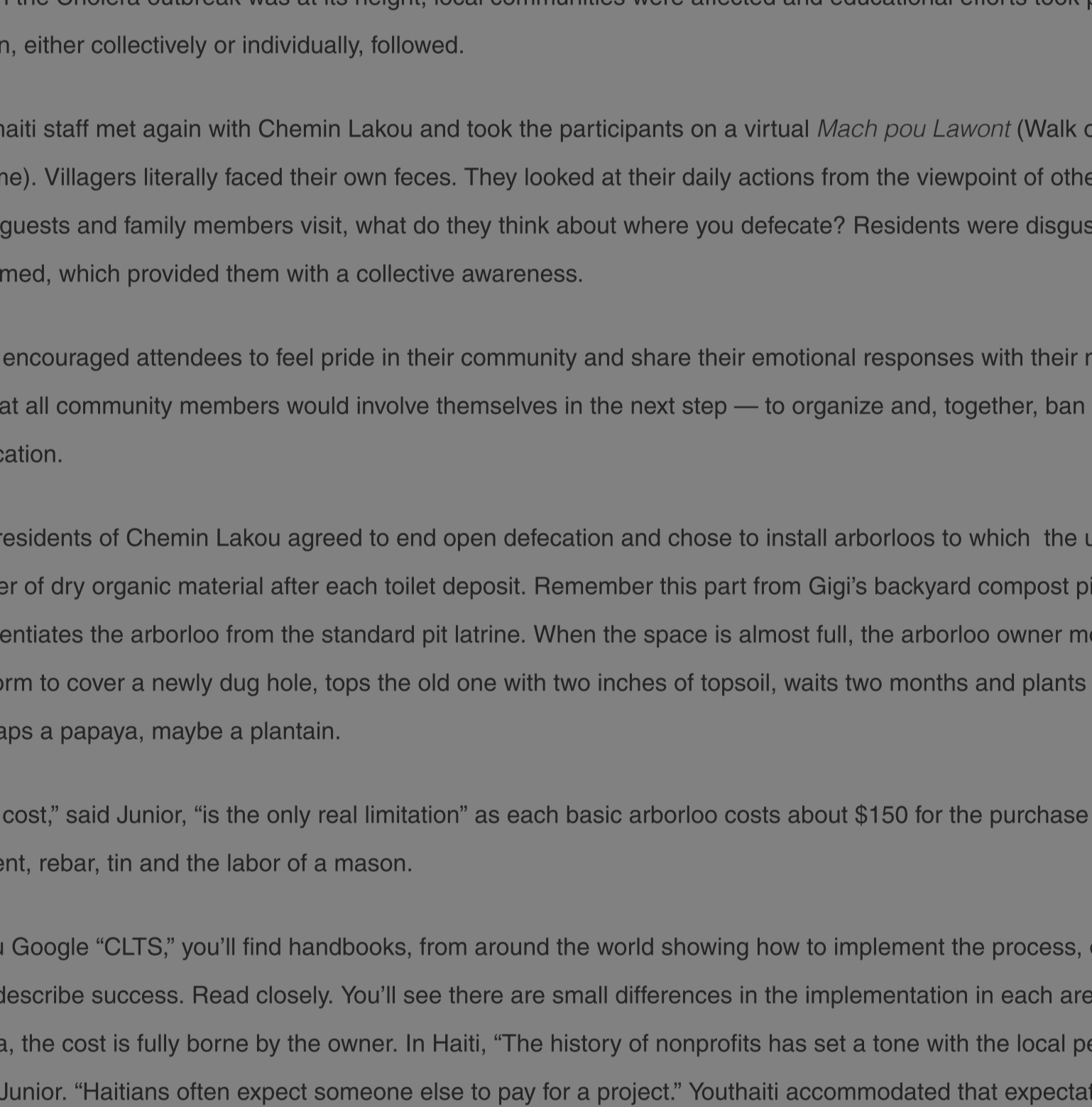
My gaze fell on some shredded paper, the latest addition to the composting mix. "Those are last month's bills," she said. "You can use dried leaves — anything organic's fine." The key is to get the balance just right between green and brown, which supply the nitrogen and carbon, with just enough moisture. Gigi dumped the contents of the bucket onto the pile, added some leaves and replaced the straw. That was it — the effectiveness of ecological sanitation depends on this basic process.

In 2015, Gigi hired Pierre "Junior" Orens from Port au Prince to join her staff of eight. From the organization's inception until now, Youth Haiti built 33 urine-diverting toilets in five of Haiti's 10 departments. When Junior joined, the organization was adjusting its focus — end open defecation. Staff worked with the local schools to educate the students on the harmfulness of the practice, to utilize a toilet and to promote and train general and menstrual hygiene.

Youth Haiti's staff members work hard with local students. They also arrange information sessions at their headquarters and celebrate World Toilet Day annually. They involve local churches and individual community leaders. They meet with anyone and everyone they can to discuss the steps necessary to achieve the goal of ending open defecation. But getting community buy-in is challenging, so they looked for other approaches and settled on CLTS.

Introducing CLTS to Duchity

A local pastor had invited Youth Haiti to his community, Chemin Lakou, where staff asked the attendees to talk about their own hygiene habits. "None of them knew the term "sanitation," Junior said, "but all of their answers were similar." They defecated in the open — whether behind a tree or a rock. When Junior asked the residents if theirs was a good or bad practice, their answers again were similar — and revealing. "They knew it was bad," he said. "It polluted the environment and caused disease."



Demonstration arborloo at Youth Haiti in Duchity. (Photo credit: J.O. Haselhoeff)

Some people in every community want to change their behavior, but everyone is at risk when a few people in the community continue to defecate in the open. Youth Haiti knew getting through to all the residents would be difficult. When the Cholera outbreak was at its height, local communities were affected and educational efforts took place. No action, either collectively or individually, followed.

Youth Haiti staff met again with Chemin Lakou and took the participants on a virtual *Mach pou Lawont* (Walk of Shame). Villagers literally faced their own feces. They looked at their daily defecation from the viewpoint of others: When you guests and family members visit, what do they think about where you defecate? The residents were disgusted and ashamed, which provided them with a collective awareness.

Staff encouraged attendees to feel pride in their community and share their emotional responses with their neighbors so that all community members would involve themselves in the next step — to organize and, together, ban open defecation.

The residents of Chemin Lakou agreed to end open defecation and chose to install arborloos to which the user adds a layer of dry organic material after each toilet deposit. Remember this part from Gigi's backyard compost pile? It differentiates the arborloo from the standard pit latrine. Because the space is almost full, the arborloo owner moves the platform to cover a newly dug hole, tops the old one with two inches of topsoil, waits two months and plants a tree — perhaps a papaya, maybe a plantain.

"The cost," said Junior, "is the only real limitation" as each basic arborloo costs about \$150 for the purchase of cement, rebar, tin and the labor of a mason.

If you Google "CLTS," you'll find handbooks, from around the world showing how to implement the process, or articles that describe success. Read closely. You'll see there are small differences in the implementation in each area. In Africa, the cost is fully borne by the owner. In Haiti, "The history of nonprofits has set a tone with the local people," said Junior. "Haitians often expect someone else to pay for a project." Youth Haiti accommodated that expectation by loaning the owner money for three years of monthly payments. Frustratingly, "The recent years of financial instability," Gigi noted, "has forced arborloo owners to stop paying their loans."

Youth Haiti has constructed over 150 units in three communities, fueling Youth Haiti's passion for the cause. Gigi and Junior have invested a lot of energy into ending open defecation in Duchity. I could hear the excitement in his voice when Junior said, "We have new results."

"What we didn't expect was that some of the neighbors would build arborloos on their own — without Youth Haiti," he said. "The people are changing their ways — whether from peer pressure or our education initiative." Junior, always an advocate for the community, saw the collective decisions to ban open defecation as an indicator of possible future agreements and action.

Gigi and Junior know change is not easy, but they're encouraged by their results to date. Youth Haiti will continue to help those living in Duchity make full use of ecological sanitation practices. The rest of us, blessed with a toilet or two, will wait and hope.

We celebrate the United Nations' International Day of Education, January 25, 2021 with this story: The General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and aimed, with Goal 4, to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all."

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J.O. Haselhoeff is the author of "Give & Take: Doing Our Damnedest NOT to be Another Charity in Haiti." She co-founded "Yonn Ede Lot" (One Helping Another), a nonprofit that worked with volunteer groups in La Montagne ("Lamontany"), Haiti from 2007-2013. She lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

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2 COMMENTS ON THIS POST TO "CAN COMMUNITY-LED TOTAL SANITATION SOLVE HAITI'S TOILETING PROBLEM?"

shakil ahmed says:
 Jan. 22, 2021 at 1:18 am

Credit must be given to Judy Haselhoeff for her meritorious services rendered to Haitian people for so long and with such a strong and keen leadership. Non availability is a world wide problem especially in developing countries. Many diseases spread when so many people defecate in open places/grounds. Hence availability of a flush system is a dire need of hour. The way author collected all this feedback and presented is really commendable... Kudos to the author for pointing out the miseries of poor people with such a nice way!!

+ REPLY

shakil ahmed says:
 Jan. 25, 2021 at 11:44 am

Open defecation in fields is really a shameful act for countless people all over the world. Not only it creates diseases, germs, stench smell but also very dangerous for girls/women and little children for defecating and sexually molesting and assaulting them. It is all on record. The best solution is to make sewerage system and latrines properly built so privacy of people can be maintained and kept. While openly defecating how can stop passers by who see them intentionally or non intentionally. It is really shameful!!!

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