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MDC nursing professor wins international award for service

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Marie Etienne laughs with her nursing students during a community service class.

Amputees were everywhere. Blood seemed to coat every surface, and people were pulling IVs out to quench their thirst. Worse was the stench, a nauseating mix of rotting dead bodies and iodine.

Marie O. Etienne, a professor of nursing at Miami Dade College, was in her birthplace of Port-au-Prince, helping the deluge of those wounded in the devastating 2010 earthquake. She took charge of two makeshift hospital tents with 200 beds.

A 24-year-old woman walked in, freezing and bleeding. "Please save me. I don't want to die!" she begged Etienne.

The woman's blood sugar was dangerously high, but there was no insulin. Her body began shutting down. Etienne and her colleagues started CPR and tried to intubate the woman, but they couldn't save her.

This was the scene that came to Etienne's mind when she learned this spring she would receive the Florence Nightingale Medal, the top international honor for nurses. She was one of five U.S. nurses to receive the award from the International Committee of the Red Cross in recognition of her service in Haiti and other contributions to the nursing profession.

"I was in tears. I'm getting a medal for saving lives — what about the ones who didn't make it?" Etienne said. "We couldn't save every single life."

Etienne was nominated for the award by Linda MacIntyre, chairwoman of the American Red Cross National Nursing Committee.

"Etienne's passion for nursing, volunteer service and dedication are demonstrated by her years of work both locally and internationally," said MacIntyre. "[She] follows in Nightingale's footsteps as a nurse leader, a teacher, a scientist, pioneer and humanitarian."

Although she had symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder when she returned from Haiti, she's been back a handful of times — including twice in May — to evaluate needs, lead medical missions and train local nursing students.

“You have to start all over again. You have to do what you have to do to take care of the next person,” she said.

Etienne has known she wanted to be a nurse since she was a child growing up with her grandmother and older sister in Arcahaie, a small city on Haiti's western coast. Her mother, who worked as a maid in the Bahamas, sent money to put Etienne through Catholic school. Her father was out of the picture. Most of her relatives were illiterate.

“Growing up I didn't see any role models, except what my grandmother taught me about honesty, compassion, integrity. She said, ‘If a homeless person walks in here and asks for a glass of water, get the best glass from my china and give it to him,’” Etienne said.

When Etienne was 8 years old, her grandmother took her and her sister to the capital to get their photos taken. But when Etienne stuck her shoes in the mud, her grandmother scolded her, and Etienne started crying. Suddenly, a nun knelt in front of her and wiped away her tears. She could never forget the way the nun looked at her, eyes brimming with compassion.

When she found out the nun was also a nurse, Etienne decided that was her calling. “I said I always want whoever I take care of to feel this way,” Etienne recalled.

When she was 14, Etienne and her sister joined their mother, who had remarried, moved to Miami and had four other children. Etienne spoke no English and had to enroll in seventh grade.

“It was a true culture shock,” Etienne said. She was picked on for being an immigrant, but focused on practicing English and volunteering in church.

Eventually, Etienne earned a bachelor's degree in nursing and a master's degree as a pediatric nurse practitioner from Florida International University. She was the first in her family to graduate from college.

In 1997, when she was a staff nurse at the North Shore Medical Center, Etienne joined the nursing faculty at Miami Dade College, where she's taught ever since. To expand her knowledge base, she pursued a certificate in advanced family practice and gerontology at FIU and, thanks to a faculty scholarship, a Doctorate of Nursing Practice at the University of Miami.

Etienne didn't lose sight of her commitment to service. In 2005, when she was president of the Haitian American Nurses Association of Florida, she led a volunteer medical mission to assist Haitian workers cutting sugar cane in the Dominican Republic.

“The level of poverty to me was worse than Haiti,” Etienne said. “Protein deficiency, malnutrition, skin conditions, ringworms, hypertension, diabetes — we saw so many problems.”

The following year, Etienne persuaded her superiors at MDC to let her take nursing students along on the next mission to the Dominican Republic, along with the nurse's association and other members of the Haitian American Professional Coalition (Etienne chaired the coalition from 2008 to 2010).

"One student said, 'We went over there thinking we were going to change their lives, and instead they changed our lives.' You could see they were transformed," said Etienne, who has led five other missions to the Dominican Republic, often with students in tow. She's also led volunteer efforts to provide health services to homeless people in Miami and uninsured immigrants in South Florida.

Etienne's next project will bring her back to Haiti. On a recent Monday afternoon, a rainbow of backpacks with pictures of Elmo, Spiderman and Dora the Explorer cascaded down the stage behind her as she taught a community service class at MDC. Etienne wore a magenta blazer and occasionally broke into a hearty chuckle as she addressed more than 100 nursing students clad in green scrubs.

The students donated the backpacks and stuffed them with everything from notebooks and pens to toy bats and flip-flops. Etienne and others from the Haitian American Nurses Association, where she is a board member, will deliver them to children in northern Haiti in July. They'll also provide medical screening and treatment to more than one thousand Haitians.

Etienne launched the backpack drive after visiting an orphanage in Gonaïves, a disaster-stricken city in northern Haiti, earlier this year. Nearly all of the children there lost both parents in the earthquake.

"My heart was quite heavy when I saw the children's faces," she said. "If your parents can't afford to send you to school, what's the point of putting on a Band-Aid?"

Nursing student Avi Engelman said Etienne inspired her to lead the month-long collection drive and donate 60 backpacks, many collected from friends.

"Her enthusiasm and way of looking at the world has taught me to be more caring and compassionate," Engelman said. "She made me feel that though I'm one person, I can make a difference."

Fellow faculty member Roxana Orta said Etienne has made a difference on campus and beyond. "What inspires me is her passion to serve, to think outside the box, to lead and to make people believe in her message," said Orta, an assistant nursing professor at MDC who worked with Etienne on the backpack drive. "She changed our profession by increasing our role in the community."

Etienne's efforts haven't gone unnoticed. Her home and office are cluttered with awards, including the 2012 Trailblazer Award from the National Black Nurses Association and Advanced Practice Nursing Award from the Florida Nurses Association. She'll add the Nightingale Medal to her collection when American Red Cross leaders hand it to her at an Oct. 23 event in Washington, D.C.

But she doesn't rest on her laurels. Besides caring for two teen-aged children in their North Miami Beach home, she regularly travels to Washington, D.C., to represent the National Black Nurses Association on the National Nursing Committee of the American Red Cross and to serve on the American Red Cross Scientific Advisory Council. And she's already planning her next trip to Haiti in the fall, when she'll bring students there for the first time.

"I believe that I was put here to serve, and that's what I'm doing," Etienne said. "It just so happens that people recognize me for that."

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