

**JOE MCGONEGAL:** This is the MIT Alumni Books Podcast. I'm Joe McGonegal, writer for the MIT Alumni Association.

When a catastrophic 7.0 earthquake struck Haiti in January 2010, killing 250,000 people. Paul Fallon, class of '77, was at home in Cambridge, Mass. An architect and writer, Fallon had visited Haiti the year before the earthquake to supervise construction of a clinic he had designed. In the months that followed the earthquake though, Fallon would plan and embark on a trip there that had even grander ambitions, and have a more severe emotional impact on him.

Fallon's new book, *Architecture by Moonlight: Rebuilding Haiti, Redrafting a Life*, recounts his journey over the next two years. One in which he weathered hurricanes and bumpy roads, along with grieving families, and differences of opinion among relief workers. Paul Fallon, thanks for joining me. Why write this book now?

**PAUL FALLON:** When I went to Haiti, I started to write about my experience because writing is my way of absorbing and trying to understand things that are beyond easy comprehension. Those blog posts eventually grew into so many that I thought, well, there's something here. And something here that I think is worth sharing, because I think our story is a positive story, and we need more positive stories about Haiti.

**MCGONEGAL:** What is it about Haiti that appeals to you?

**FALLON:** It's a really good question that I didn't even ask myself until the night of the earthquake. I got calls from all kinds of people the night of the earthquake asking me if I was OK. And I'm like, of course I'm OK. I'm in Cambridge. But I realized part of human nature is that we equate people with places, and experiences, and activities, and my families and friends when they heard about the earthquake in Haiti, they all thought of me.

And they all said, well you talk about Haiti all the time. And I hadn't realized how it had gotten under my skin until that happened. The earthquake really brought that to the fore for me.

The thing about Haiti that's very hard to convey in this country, is that it is magical. Haiti is magical. It's deforested, and it's ugly, and it's poor, but it's also mystical, and spiritual, and deep. It is just phenomenal to think that people lead such rich and deserving lives that are so different than our own. It's just a completely different way of thinking about what life is about.

That was something that the seeds were planted my first trip there, and then when the earthquake happened I just felt a need to contribute.

I had a secondary need, which really bothers me about the earthquake because so many people died because of the buildings. I mean, I'm an architect. I'm involved in building buildings. A month after the Haiti earthquake there was an 8.8 earthquake in Chile and 523 people died. So that earthquake in Chile was 60 times more powerful, and Chile has the most stringent earthquake building requirements in the world and Haiti had none. That's something that I felt a personal responsibility for.

**MCGONEGAL:** I feel it developed nations focus their attention on natural disasters like this one immediately after the fact. But then there's always a window and a lag, and the sense of tragedy dissipates. Did you feel that way about Haiti?

**FALLON:** I can't actually say that's the case for me. When we look at Haiti and the disaster that happened there, and especially the response to it from a relief perspective, it was overwhelming and massive. The work that I did was one little part. I worked in one small town that is hardly a blip on the radar screen of the total relief effort.

I did not work with a large relief, sort of, money sources. Our projects were not involved in the Clinton-Bush Fund or the World Bank or any of those things. And we were well outside of Port Au Prince. So as we got involved and immediately got to know the people in the community, got to be part of the community, there was a lot of continuity there.

I believe that for most people who survived the earthquake, once they found permanent shelter their lives have improved. The relief efforts from the earthquake, it's very easy to debate the fact that they were inefficient, and they may not have been everything that they promised, have in fact raised the profile of Haiti across the world and raised opportunity for Haitians in general. And I was fortunate to have been to Haiti before the earthquake. So I actually had that trip, which at the time I didn't realize would become a benchmark for thinking about how Haiti has evolved.

**MCGONEGAL:** So you didn't have to cope with as much shock as many relief workers did of arriving there for the first time.

**FALLON:** No. That's true, and I also was not a first responder. My involvement in Haiti has really been sort of a 2.0 level of reconstruction. Where we've really been involved in making permanent

structures that not only serve the community for a long period of time, but in an earthquake resistant way. So that when the next one happens, the structures can still stand.

**MCGONEGAL:** You tell the story of the Gangle family in this book, who wants to build an orphanage to honor their daughter Brittany. Why did you feel motivated to join them?

**FALLON:** I had worked for a group from Gardner, Massachusetts, which was a medical group, and I'd be working with them since 2007. When the Gangle's daughter died in the earthquake, they got in touch with that group, because they were just one town away. And we all met in June of 2010 and I knew immediately that Len Gangle was a very serious contender, and doing something in Haiti. He had the energy, and the motivation, and the capability, and I really wanted to work on a project there.

**MCGONEGAL:** It seems like the lessons you learned about architecture in Haiti differed vastly from your lessons at MIT.

**FALLON:** Well, I think that's one of my sort of final takeaways in the book. When I think about, throughout the whole process I keep asking myself, what am I doing here. And the ultimate answer is not enough. Haiti has a series of immediate concerns that traditional aid don't address well.

Architects are great. I love being an architect. I love what architects provide to society, but in a society that doesn't have running water, and doesn't have sanitation, and doesn't have building codes, and doesn't have basic rudimentary construction, the overlay that an architect gives may not be its highest invest need. The longer I stayed there, the more rudimentary my service to Haiti was. And although I did design buildings, and they were built, and there was an architectural component to it, my greater contribution to Haiti had to do with helping to train construction workers to understand the logistics of earthquake resistant concrete construction. Work with laborers to learn how to use computers and develop spreadsheets.

So I did come away with the idea that architects, as we think of them in the United States, are not an immediate need. On the flip side I actually feel like Haiti needs a much broader view of who a planner might be. I believe that Haitians have a really strong motivation for a decentralized way of life.

In Laurent Dubois book, Haiti: The Aftershocks of History, he talks about the coup, which are these small communities that were developed after the Haitians overthrew the French in 1804.

And how the coup set up a form of decentralized community that really worked in opposition to government. And I think it's very easy to see over time that the average Haitian has lived in opposition to centralized authority.

So, at one level I think Haiti needs sanitation, and plumbers, and civil engineers. On another level, it would be wonderful if Haiti could find a way to be part of a 21st century world, in a way that wasn't vertically integrated the way we think of the United States and China and other industrialized nations.

**MCGONEGAL:** Bring your son Andy, and your daughter Abby, later with you. You also pick up, or you say they adopt you, to other children while building the orphanage. I found myself thinking about the notion of fatherhood as I was reading. Did your views of being a father change through all this?

**FALLON:** That's a really interesting question. I am fortunate to have two children of my own who are very accomplished people, and they were very interested in coming, and participating, and being part of. And I was equally fortunate that on my second trip there, literally, this little kid did adopt me. I mean we're building temporary houses and all of a sudden, he starts feeding me nails, and I can't lose him for anything. Jennison. And to me Jennison is the story thread of what happens to me. He survived the earthquake with his family. Later on his mother died. Then he lived among relatives. Then the relatives couldn't afford to have him, and he got sent to Port Au Prince. And this is a kid who's used to living on the street. He's capable of living with almost nothing.

It became an interesting experience for me to respect that, and find a way to be able to offer Jennison opportunities without robbing Jennison of who he is, and what are essentially some of his best survival characteristics. Eventually, I discover that Jennison has half brother, and we worked together to support them. Right now it's just a constant ongoing game of supporting them, and trying to keep them in school, and also allowing them to have a lot of freedom because they are used to it.

So, my thoughts about fatherhood might have evolved and A, I definitely decided I didn't want any more children. Because several people said are you going to bring Jennison and Jerry back to the United States, and the answer to that is no. I mean, they are so Haitian. I don't think it serves them well. But what serves them well, and what serves Haiti well, is the opportunity for people with their energy, and their instincts, and their capabilities, to develop

educational and training skills. And stay in Haiti and help to improve Haiti.

**MCGONEGAL:** Back to your MIT education, what if anything, did you invoke from your years here during your time in Haiti?

**FALLON:** My experience at MIT was a very good one. I'm originally from Oklahoma. I don't come from a family where people went to college as the norm. And MIT did an awful lot to help me succeed. The skills at MIT in parts, the analytic capabilities, the ability to question, the ability to sort of think about things, and look at problems from a different perspective have been part of every endeavor I've ever been involved with.

Those skills are particularly handy to have in Haiti. I mean more than once I would be confronted with some challenge, and it was almost never a technical challenge, it was almost always a communication challenge. How do we help the labor crews understand why thus and such is important? And then I would sleep on it. And I would wake up in the morning and I would have an approach. I guess MIT taught me to think during my sleep.

There is one story in the book that's completely about MIT. One of the groups I've worked with there were evangelical Christians, and I am not an evangelical Christian. And so it was a interesting exploration for me to constantly be confronted with this way of looking at the world. And Gamma, a Haitian-American that I worked with on a daily basis, was an evangelical. We had a long discussion one morning when I was really not quite awake for it, about the difference between good, and bad, and evil, and sin.

And as I've really thought through that conversation later, it reminded me of freshman year at MIT. Where you know, you're not pass fail here. Pass, no pass. And that is in fact what I experienced on the job sites. In Creole, the word for something well-done is bon, similar to French. But if someone makes a mistake, you don't say mal. It's not bad. You just say pa bon.

And that's really what freshman year at MIT is about. It's about pass, no pass. It's not about pass, fail. It's about pass, or just keep working it and you will pass. It it's an attitude about failure. And that attitude about failure is what helped us succeed in Haiti. If we had said bad every time something wasn't right, or if we said, we threw up our hands and we can't do it, we would not have built two significant buildings in this community in two years.

But when things went bad, or went wrong, or went short, every day. You would just say pa bon. And you would come back at and you'd work at it. I really feel like that's an integral aspect

of MIT. Failure is not even in the vocabulary. That's what I liked.

And then I found that failure was not in the vocabulary of Haiti. I don't think I ever said mal to anyone. I said pa bon a lot.

**MCGONEGAL:** How else could MIT contribute to the work in Haiti?

**FALLON:** Haiti is a great example of a place that is going to leap frog over conventional technologies. It has no real roots. It does not have electrical power lines. It doesn't have any of the infrastructure that here, in the United States, take for granted.

At the same time, they have like, fabulous cell service. Everyone in Haiti has a cell phone and it and it was really one of the things that really changed the way people communicated over the last five years. And I think the fact that Haiti is both geographically close to United States, and yet is such a underdeveloped third world country, it's a great lab for how developing countries are going to leap frog technology.

I mean, I know in the school that we designed, we have negroponte, little wind computers. I mean that's what the students are learning. I was so happy to see them have those. I mean the kids loved when they or their class got to go to their computer lab and use that stuff.

So the idea that technologies are going to be able to leapfrog is really one of the things that's going to be great for Haiti. Where the ability to put the kind of infrastructure of roads, and transportation, and communications systems that are so hardwired in the United States, in the developed world, they won't have to go through that infrastructure cost. And so how MIT researchers and MIT applications people can think about that, will be awesome.

**MCGONEGAL:** It's now been 4 and 1/2 years since the earthquake. Do you plan on returning?

**FALLON:** When I finished the project that I had, I briefly investigated opportunities to work in Haiti. And I have to admit, I'm not that kind of saint. I mean, my experience in Haiti was living in very primitive conditions. And those primitive conditions are energizing and exciting on two week intervals. I don't think I would feel the same way on an ongoing basis. I have continued to do work in Haiti. I am now doing work for Partners in Health, as well as some other medical groups, and the opportunity presents itself to go and be involved in the details of construction, I certainly anticipate I won't go to Haiti again.

**MCGONEGAL:** We'll talk about what else you're reading right now.

**FALLON:** I'm actually reading Jane Austen's, Persuasion. So I think you could say I'm looking for a change, because that is very, very different than everything that I read in putting together of this.

**MCGONEGAL:** Paul Fallon's new book Architecture by Moonlight: Rebuilding Haiti, Redrafting of Life is available this month from University of Missouri Press Online, or from your favorite local bookstore. Paul Allen, thanks for joining me.

**FALLON:** Thank you.