

*Help Hayti* is dedicated to the memory of my father, Montaigu (Guy—pronounced Ghee) Cantave. Agronomist by profession, Bwa—as close friends of his affectionately called him—was altogether a brilliant thinker whose intelligence dazzled his interlocutors, a dialectician who relished a debate and frustrated his opponents, an austere father who did not settle for mediocrity, a mentor who rewarded promising young talents with his friendship, and a *bon vivant* who professed love for life.

Montaigu Cantave was born on December 8, 1922 in Gonaives, Haiti's birthplace. He was raised in the City of the Independence until he graduated from high school. He then attended the Faculté d'Agronomie et de Médecine Vétérinaire (College of Agronomy and Veterinary Medicine.) As customary in this discipline, upon graduation, he was dispatched to rural areas to provide technical support to the peasants and shore up the agricultural production in these regions. While he enjoyed the bucolic aspect of the backcountry, he was, above all, captivated by the peasants' wisdom, their intelligence, and their simple way of life. He soon discovered that he, and the country as a whole for that matter, had much to learn from them.

From the late forties to the early fifties, Bwa was a resident agronomist in Marbial, a rural locality some ten miles from Jacmel in the Southeast, where he developed strong ties with his hosts and in Aquin in the South. Half a dozen years later, he obtained a fellowship to pursue a specialization in rice culture in the U.S. at the University of Texas. Equipped with a solid training and a couple of diplomas, he returned to Haiti. He was sent to other parts of the country, particularly Saint-Raphael in the North, where his association with the peasants grew. Soon, opportunities to work abroad availed themselves to him. He landed a position with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), an agency of the United Nations based in Rome. As an FAO expert, he traveled to various parts of the world. He settled in Cambodia and worked for about 4 years with the peasants of that Asian country. Next, he was appointed to the Congo, where he worked for about a year. After 5 years with the FAO, he resigned his post and returned to Haiti in 1962, eager to leverage his expertise and international exposure to launch his business ventures and advance his career as a technocrat.

Montaigu Cantave's entrepreneurial endeavors led him to the valleys of Seguin, in the Marigot area of the Southeast. Seguin's temperate climate was ideal for the cultivation of onions and potatoes. He held farming operations in Fonds Parisien, La Plaine du Cul de Sac, Fonds Verretes, among other places. In the late 1970's the Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Rural Development (DARNDR) called on him to join its senior staff as *Directeur-General*. In that capacity, he was instrumental in the restructuration effort of the ministerial department. He also proved to be a visionary and innovator: He spearheaded the establishment of silos to stock grains the State purchased directly from the peasants. The aim of this program was to incentivize the latter and empower them as players in the marketplace. The *Plan Quinquennal de Commercialisation Agricole 1981-1986*, issued by *Le Service National de Commercialisation Agricole (SENECA)* in 1981 spoke of the novelty of this approach in

these terms (translating) “*Cantave’s proposal not only introduced a new variable into the model, but benefited from the government’s decision to act directly in the regulation of the grain marketplace.*” In the early 1980s, he was elevated to the post of Secretary of State for Agriculture and Natural Resources. In the second half of the decade, he acceded to the post of Minister of DARNDR.

Montaigu Cantave retired from public life in the late 1980’s. However, he continued to be active in various areas. He devoted more time to his agricultural and farming endeavors. At some point, he chaired the Agriculture Department at one of Haiti’s universities—*[Confirm with Myrtho and others]*. He also continued to be a point of reference on anything relating to agriculture in Haiti. In effect, in 2006, he was among the experts paneled for an agri-business study done by the European Development Fund.

Most fascinating about my father was the depth of his knowledge and thinking. When it comes to Haiti, his view was that the true measure of its development is the degree to which the living condition in the countryside has changed. Imbued of the theory of dialectical materialism, he was convinced that any viable change would have to take into account the peasant’s economic realities. He lamented the fact that the set of policies and structures in place—whether fiscal, economic, legal, medical, or educational—had failed our peasantry. The key to redressing the wrongs inflicted upon this class of our citizenry is Education. What he had in mind was a notion much distinct from what was taught within the walls of our schools. He was incensed by the aberrations of the traditional educational system—a wholesale system which, from a content as well as a pedagogy perspective, had little relevance to the realities of the *milieu*. In his view, that education was devoid of practical meaning and bypassed the needs and priorities of some 80% of the country’s population. He was the proponent of an indigenous system of education attuned to our daily realities, flexible enough to reflect, and adapt to, the various facets of the nation’s way of life. He advocated a system with which the peasants would feel comfortable—a system that uses concepts familiar to them, reflects their cosmogony, and factors in their proverbial wisdom, and their oral literature. He favored an integrated education whereby the instructional materials were not based on abstract or alien concepts, but anchored in local ecology, socio-politics and economics—a system that involves the peasants as participants in the make-up of their destiny and that open up avenues for effective agrarian policies to the benefit of the peasants and the country as a whole.

*Help Hayti* grew in the shadow of such powerful thinking. Since its inception in 1986, our organization has been a committed advocate on behalf of the peasant community and worked with grass-roots organizations to effect dynamic change in rural areas. To better serve its purpose of “integrating actions that permanently reestablish the social, economic, and physical equilibrium of Haiti”, it evolved in 2005 into tax-exempt nonprofit corporation chartered under the 501 © (3) rubric of the US Internal Revenue Service (IRS) code. My father has been involved with the organization from the outset.

In addition to being a founding member and an advisor, he donated the land that houses the first of the nine *Adopt-A-Community* projects identified to carry out *Help Hayti's* strategic initiatives. Most importantly, he was instrumental in the project's winning the hearts and minds of the population of Fonds Verrettes, a remote locality of the Center region of the country. As the Education arm of *Help Hayti, Adopt-A-Community's* stated goal is to "provide the targeted nine communities with a residential school complete with an infirmary, a community cistern system and a nursery for 100,000 tree seedlings for a school-based community-run reforestation project." A small step toward my father's vision!