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A 30-YEAR PASSION FOR



HELPING HAITIANS

BY MICHAEL PETITTI

Every Thursday, a conference room at the law firm of Schnader Harrison Segal & Lewis LLP buzzes with activity. Seated around a long table and pouring through the double doors are Haitians living in Philadelphia who have eagerly come to the room to apply for Haitian-issued passports necessary for travel to their home country. They share stories – most told in their native language – while Giordani Jean-Baptiste, the vice president of the Haitian Coalition of Philadelphia, volunteers his time to act as translator and help each person complete the required forms.



Giordani Jean-Baptiste helps a Haitian family with passport questions at the offices of Schnader Harrison Segal & Lewis LLP.

Standing off to the side, quiet but attentive, is Albert Momjian, a partner at Schnader and chair of the firm's Family Law Department. Regarded by many as the dean of the Pennsylvania family law bar whose landmark treatise, *Pennsylvania Family Law*, is often cited by the state's appellate courts, Momjian has been the honorary consul to the Republic of Haiti for the Philadelphia Region since 1978, when he was appointed by the country's then-ruler, Jean-Claude Duvalier, following a recommendation from the departing consul and Momjian's friend, Norman Kalcheim.

"I had some knowledge of Norman's work as a consul but knew little of Haiti," Momjian said. "Still, I was honored to take his position and quickly learned my role."

In 2002, Momjian gained permission from the Haitian Consulate General in New York to issue passports in Philadelphia. His firm supported the effort and supplied the space. Previously, Haitians in need of this service would have to travel to New York City or Washington D.C., resulting in a loss of a day's work and other debilitating costs. Now, Momjian, along with Jean-Baptiste and Elizabeth Nicolas, an associate at Schnader who is Haitian and speaks Creole, volunteer their time every Thursday from 11 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. to make life easier for Haitians living in Philadelphia.

"Most honorary consuls don't do this," Momjian says with a smile as he surveys the bustling conference room. "I am very happy to have the people here."

There are 33 honorary consuls in the Philadelphia Consular

Corps, the oldest Consular Corps in the country. Momjian is currently the group's president. Each Consul is formally accepted by the U.S. Department of State and all are tasked with developing economic, commercial, scientific and cultural relations between the country they represent and Philadelphia

as well as safeguarding the interests of the represented country's citizens traveling to and from or residing in Philadelphia. In addition to Haiti, countries represented by a Consul in Philadelphia include France, Italy, Israel, Japan and Korea.

Prior to Jan. 12, 2010, Momjian's work for Haiti and its people was as vast as it was unheralded. He helped collect used hospital equipment and supplies for shipment to Haiti for use in public hospitals and arranged for large quantities of soup from Campbell Soup Company to be sent to the country. He oversaw the sealing of coffins of deceased Haitians returning to their homeland and served as a resource to Haitians in prison for drug or immigration issues. He worked with his friend Ed Snider, owner of the Philadelphia Flyers and 76ers, to arrange young

Haitians' attendance at Sixers' games followed by a visit with former player Samuel Dalembert, a native of Haiti. He lectured on Haitian history at Philadelphia-area schools, joined Haitian friends at celebrations of their unique cultural events and attended monthly meetings of the Philadelphia Consular Corps along with the other local consuls.

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But in the beginning of this year, Momjian's role as Philadelphia's liaison to Haiti took on a whole new dimension. A 7.0-magnitude earthquake rocked the island, causing significant damage to the country's capital, Port-au-Prince, and many other areas. In the aftermath of the disaster, The International Federation of the Red Cross reported an estimated 3 million people were affected by the quake, and the Haitian government reported that approximately 230,000 people had died, 300,000 had been injured and 1 million made homeless.

This devastation was compounded by the fact that Haiti was a struggling nation long before the disaster. Beset by civil and political unrest for decades – the country has suffered 32 coups in its 200-year history – 80 percent of Haiti's citizens live in poverty, according to a 2003 Central Intelligence Agency report. The illiteracy rate stands around 50 percent and most Haitians must survive on \$2 or less per day. Cité Soleil, Haiti's largest slum and one of the areas most damaged in the disaster, has been called "the most dangerous place on Earth" by the United Nations. The country's infrastructure is well-behind even basic standards, with poorly constructed shanties and shacks dominating the landscape – most of which were decimated on Jan. 12.

"My immediate thought [after being told about the earthquake] was why would one of the poorest countries in the world become the victim of one of the world's most terrible natural disasters," Momjian said. "Misery was added to misery."

The day after the tragedy, Momjian was quoted in a statement on his firm's website.

"In this critical, desperate time, I would like to offer my sincere prayers, heartfelt condolences and absolute support for the citizens, friends and family who have been touched by this disaster, both in Haiti and in the Philadelphia region. I strongly urge everyone to pledge whatever support they can... to the people of Haiti during this awful, tragic time."

In his unique capacity, Momjian felt compelled to double

his efforts to help Haiti's people, who he calls "wonderful." Joined by the Haitian Coalition of Philadelphia, he helped coordinate the shipment of hundreds of thousands of tents to Haitians who had lost their homes. Assisted by The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, he arranged for physicians and nurses to travel to Haiti to help the injured. He spoke at The Salvation Army of Greater Philadelphia's massive two-day volunteer effort to package one million meals for earthquake survivors on May 22 at the State Armory at Drexel University, thanking volunteers for their selflessness and generosity. He visited several schools and churches to discuss the tragedy. Perhaps most heart wrenching, he spoke with dozens of Haitians living in Philadelphia by phone, each one desperate to know the fate of relatives still living in their home country.

"I was unable to respond because the victims were being buried in mass graves and nobody was able to identify them or record their names," Momjian said. "When the phone calls came in, I had to be honest and say if the caller did not hear from his or her family or friends after a week or so, he or she might have to accept the fact that they had died."

In the packed conference room, Momjian cannot help but reflect on the stark contrast between those difficult conversations and the happiness and hope on the faces of the many Haitians applying for passports. The overwhelming global support in the quake's aftermath has gone a long way in restoring this hope – as do the continued donations, which Momjian stressed are still vitally important. But Momjian says that Haitians are an inherently patient people who understand that the reconstruction will not happen quickly.

"When I welcome these people every Thursday, I'm happy to see they are excited to return to their home country after the earthquake and see their families," Momjian said. "With all that they have gone through, they still look to the future and pray for a new Haiti." ■

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