



Author Lauren Neder is pictured with Kerson, a student in the painting class at Imagine Missions Professional School.

## Mission imaginable: Putting ISE principles to work in Haiti

*Purdue grad navigates cultural, logistical challenges at Imagine Missions school in Caribbean nation*

By Lauren Neder

I applied to one university, and in my application essay I wrote that I wanted to use a Purdue University engineering degree to help others. As a high school student semi-familiar with industrial engineering, I thought that meant creating efficient processes that helped people work better. I had no idea that, for me, it would mean moving to Haiti to create a sustainable supply chain and utilize an objective-based curriculum process to ensure bright futures for 120 Haitian students as the director of Imagine Missions Professional School.

My dad worked as a chemical engineer, so I always considered engineering to be a great career choice. During my time at Purdue, I enjoyed learning about workflow analysis and supplementing my IE coursework with psychology classes. I became involved with a church on campus, and when some members planned a spring break trip during my junior year to Imagine Missions, a Haitian orphanage, my interest was piqued. To be honest, the idea of going to another country and getting to interact with some cute kids was enough to sell me, so I signed up and went.



It was that spring break in 2013 that Haiti captured my heart. Looking back, I know it wasn't the potential to help reinvent a curriculum or create a supply chain that drew me back to Haiti – it was the children and people themselves. I knew I had to return to see them and help in the ways I can. It was during that first trip that my friendships at Imagine Missions Orphanage started with children that are now young adults enrolled in the Imagine Missions Professional School.

I returned to see my friends at this orphanage in March of 2014, and two months later graduated with my degree in industrial engineering, ready to change the world. I got a job working in more of a management position than engineering but returned to Imagine Missions whenever I could. I made six trips in those three years, and each time I learned something new that broke my heart for Haiti.

A few friends and I developed a summer camp for Imagine Missions called Camp Imagine, and my IE skills often came in handy in such decision-making processes as “How do we most efficiently transport 100 children to and from a local pool with one-and-a-half working pickup trucks so everyone gets a turn to swim?”

My first job wasn't easy. I never felt I was truly impacting anyone's life in a positive way. I contemplated looking for something else and repeatedly considered moving to Haiti. But in those four years of work, I matured and learned patience. I served on Imagine Missions' board of directors and learned that monthly donations are vital to the youth I love being able to help survive and thrive. With a working salary, I could help in that crucial way. Yet with each trip to Haiti, the idea of living there felt increasingly plausible.

## Why Imagine Missions?

Imagine Missions has been a beacon of hope for the town of Despinos since it began eight years ago out of a need to support an existing orphanage. The orphanage, originally built in the 1970s, houses 84 kids, 58 living inside the orphanage and 26 in transitional housing. The transitional housing is for youth ages 18 years or older; per Haitian law, a child must move out of an orphanage once they turn 18. Most 18-year-olds who have lived in an orphanage aren't finished with school, don't have a trade and haven't been exposed to life outside the orphanage walls. As we'd say in America, they haven't learned “how to adult.” This causes a huge shock when in most orphanages 18-year-olds are put out and told “Good luck.”

Imagine Missions does things differently. We secure housing for these young adults and continue to support them as



Credit: Photos courtesy of Lauren Nelder

**Members of an electricians' class at the Imagine Missions Professional School are pictured with their professor, Bob, at top right.**

they continue their education. They must honor a signed contract to perform weekly chores and community service. Youth are matched with sponsors who support school, room and board. Once they finish with school, they can continue living in the housing and pay rent, following a grace period to allow them time to obtain employment.

Of the 84 youth Imagine Missions supports, 47 are ages 15 or older. As the proportion of children nearing adulthood has increased since Imagine's inception, the need to equip youth with skills to provide for themselves has become crucial. The Professional School was started as a way for them to support themselves. The school offers 15 different trades including electricity technology, mechanic, plumbing, advertisement painting, jewelry-making, masonry, Haitian metal art, crocheting, paper flower-making, tiling, pedicurist, beautician, barbering, computer technology and sewing.

I partnered with Imagine Missions because this organization values and empowers the youth I love. It goes the extra mile to ensure these incredible young people will have bright futures and enter adulthood equipped for community life in Haiti.

## The challenges of life in Haiti

When I celebrated my 27th birthday in Haiti, my sister asked if she could send a gift. But there is no mail in Haiti, nor post offices. Though new companies are working toward providing shipping, we are a long way from Amazon. If you haven't been to Haiti, it's hard to understand the lack of infrastructure; it took me one month to see a traffic light and we just drove right through it like it wasn't even there. The roads snake in and out onto side streets with no pattern and no signage. But everyone knows where to go and life is lived at a pace that is frustrating and beautiful at the same time.

Because there are no post offices, postal workers aren't needed. Because there are few streetlights, electricians to fix them aren't needed. Thus, one can easily see why there is a lack of

employment. Haiti's unemployment rate is the highest in the Western hemisphere, around 14%. The national poverty rate is estimated at 58.6%, and having a job doesn't always mean basic needs are met. Goods aren't cheaper because of the large number of imports; gas is \$3 to \$5 a gallon and a 2-pound bag of beans is \$9.

Yet imagine buying things for the same cost while making only \$2 a day. In Haiti, many live in survival mode. Without the chance to save or plan for the future, death or sickness can shock a family and drag them down.

Life in Haiti is hard, and even when things should work, they find a way not to. Tasks such as getting a passport can become a long and expensive process. It's not uncommon for birth certificates to be filed (yes, paper files) in the wrong place or for names to be spelled incorrectly. With all these obstacles, you are often left to trust the people around you to help navigate and survive.

But I chose to work in Haiti not despite but because of these struggles. Haitians are a humble, resourceful people who deserve more. The youth at Imagine Missions deserve bright futures. With my background in industrial engineering, I knew I could help make the "more" a reality.

I moved to Haiti in June 2018 to restructure the Professional School. Because I'm an IE, I could identify the "low-hanging fruit" quite easily, so I immediately began to tackle it. Based on feedback from Haitian professors, I increased ease and access to supplies, number of days for class and effective ways to keep supplies flowing properly to the many children who call Imagine Missions home.

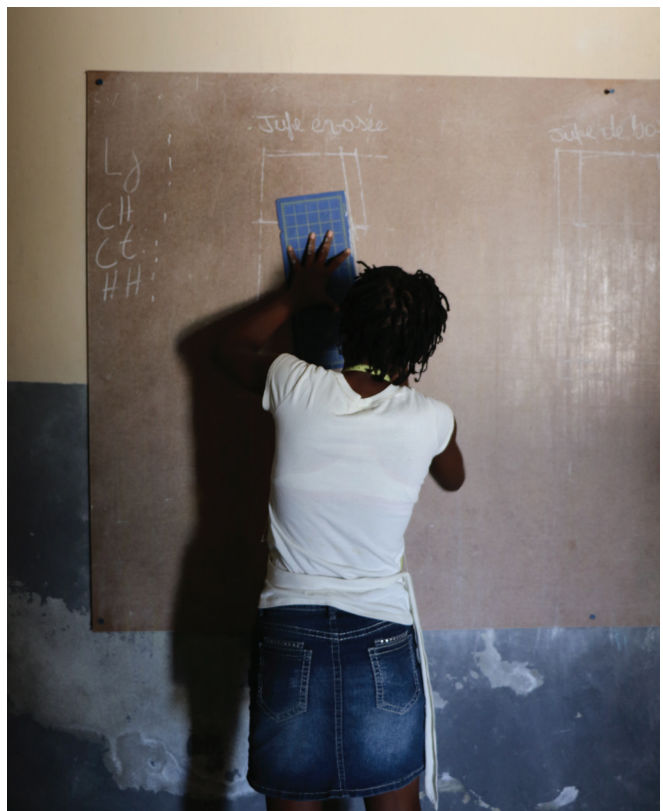
These changes were for the better, but in hindsight I didn't ask an important initial question: What is the goal of professional school? To place students in jobs? To provide the opportunity to learn? Once the "low-hanging fruit" was all "picked," I wasn't sure where to go next. I backtracked to that crucial question: What is the goal? It's amazing how much direction came from answering that. Upon reflection, the goal of the Professional School became clear: To provide education outside of an academic classroom to give career options to our students. Ideally, students will experience one of two desired outcomes: find a job in the field they are studying, or learn a means through which they can build savings to pursue higher education.

As Professional School director, my first role is to help a student identify which path to pursue. Secondly, it is to empower professors to best teach students to become proficient in their field. The third is to create avenues of profit for our students, for artistry-based classes like metalwork.

Because of my IE training, I felt I could do all three. When I answered "What is the goal" followed by "What is my role," it led me to my next steps: create life plans



A student works laying tile as hands-on practice during a tiling class at the Professional School.



A student in sewing class draws out a pattern for a shirt she will make.





Imagine Missions Professional School director Lauren Neder stands with several of the school's female students.

with our students; implement objective-based curriculums for our teachers; and set up a supply chain to help our students sell goods in America.

### Creating life plans

This may be my favorite role. A student creating a life plan puts concentrated effort into visualizing his or her future. So much of Haiti is lived day-to-day, with so much time and energy spent securing basic needs that little time is set aside looking to the future. Life plans determine students' strengths and opportunities, give them short-, mid- and long-term goals, and assign specific actions to help achieve them.

We use the goals to determine if our professional school will better serve them as a way to make money to save for a future university education or to acquire skills for full-time employment. I hear all the dreams and hopes of students, which motivates me to make our school the best it can be.

One of my favorite life plans is that of a bright 18-year-old named Oscar, who is in 11th grade and is amazing at everything he tries. He learned to dance hip-hop by watching YouTube videos, plays piano at church every Sunday and is always either first or second in his class. His future brims with potential. When we set his long-term goal, he told me his goal depended on whether he could come to America. He said if he went to a university in the U.S., he wanted to become a civil engineer. But if he stayed in Haiti, where he didn't think there were good universities to study engineering, he'd become a teacher instead.

I have known Oscar since he was 13 and always thought he was capable of doing whatever he wanted. It was heart-breaking to hear he thought he couldn't reach his full potential in Haiti. I Googled engineering universities and found several accredited schools in Haiti. Oscar sat next to me poring over the information and soon found one he loved. Oscar's long-term goal is to attend that university; his short-term goal is to enter our computer class in professional school to give him the experience he will need.

Another student, Carlson, is also 18 but in eighth grade. Before he came to Imagine Missions 10 years ago, his mother was unable to pay for

him to attend school every year. Carlson is a very driven and charismatic. Visitors who come to Imagine Missions know him because of his amazing English skills and ability to form connections quickly.

When I sat down with Carlson, he said he wanted to be a pilot. I never want to diminish anyone's dream but I believe it's my responsibility to be realistic, so I explained the time commitment it would take. As I spoke, I could see him getting discouraged. I asked him why he wanted to be a pilot to identify the reason behind this dream. After many more "whys," we got to the real reason: He wants to travel and see the world.

I explained a few different jobs that would enable him to do that in a shorter time frame, and he decided becoming a flight attendant was an attainable long-term goal. He speaks Haitian Creole and English fluently and is studying both French and Spanish. With his sparkling personality, he will have no problem practicing the many people skills involved. Carlson decided to enter barber class because he enjoys cutting hair and as a way to make money while finishing his school and pursuing training to become a flight attendant.

Opportunities in Haiti aren't easy to come by, but the students at Imagine Missions Professional School are learning to create and execute realistic action plans through goal-setting to pursue and seize opportunities when they come.

### Objective-based curriculums

Setting objective-based curriculums required a precision of communication with our professors that was a huge struggle.

I can ask common questions and have simple conversations in Haitian Creole but cannot yet effectively explain complex concepts like the importance of hands-on practice and connecting it to theory to our professional school professors.

Luckily, I was blessed with an amazing friend named Brunel, who has worked at Imagine Missions for 19 years, speaks English fluently and has a deep understanding of Haitian culture to help me navigate when I find myself lost in cultural and language snafus. When we held our first few meetings, I found myself frustrated when professors would come 30 minutes late. I expressed these frustrations to Brunel who gently reminded me some of them live up to 40 minutes away and rely on public transportation that does not run on a set schedule. He told me the teacher will respect the start time once I'd proven I deserve their respect.

We Americans feel entitled to automatic respect even as we ask those from a different culture to meet our expectations, sometimes before we have proven ourselves and our good intentions. In the process of demonstrating patience in these initial meetings, mutual respect blossomed between the staff, Brunel and myself as we worked together to dream of what we want the school to be. Brunel helped the flow of communication, by stepping into the role of co-director, and will make an excellent long-term director of our Professional School. It's a team effort.

To date, all of our professors have intentionally identified and written objectives for their classes, including topics, practices and theories students are required to understand and master before receiving a certificate of completion in their course.

### Setting up a supply chain

Before moving to Haiti in June 2018, my goal was to have products ready by November and open our shop by the end of the year. Within a month, I realized that was unrealistic. In Haiti, mastering raw material sourcing, quality and consistency of products, and the exact timing of production and shipping, requires ample time and research. Once I created a new launch timeline with my specific goals outlined, it became clear that June 2019, a year into my time living in Haiti, would be a feasible "launch month."

The lack of consistent infrastructure became the greatest struggle in tackling the supply chain. I wanted most of the raw materials to be purchased locally to infuse the local economy. Yet it was a challenge in sourcing consistent materials. Most of what we purchased was imported, and each "supply run" involved a long car ride to the market.

As an American female, I was never comfortable making trips by myself, so it also involved finding an available driver working for our organization who could take time from their busy day to take me and negotiate the price of goods. I collected supply lists from teachers (who wrote in Creole)



Students in the cosmetology class practice on each other at the Professional School.

## Haiti's stormy status leads to poverty

The economic challenges faced by Haiti are both natural and manmade, with storms both tropical and political driving its status as the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere.

Haiti's gross domestic product per capita was \$870 in 2018 with a Human Development Index ranking of 163 out of 188 countries in 2016, according to the World Bank.

Based on the most recent household survey in 2012, more than 6 million Haitians live below the poverty line earning less than \$2.41 U.S. dollars per day, and more than 2.5 million fall below the extreme poverty line (\$1.23 per day).

Though the Caribbean nation's GDP grew slightly from 1.2% in 2017 to 1.5% in 2018, it was accompanied by a deepening of the budget deficit, which surged from 1.9% of GDP in 2017 to 4.3% in 2018. As a result, the national currency, the gourde, continues to depreciate, fueling double-digit inflation of around 15%.

Politically, Haiti has had to contend with several periods of instability caused by demonstrations, strikes and civil unrest at the national level.

From the outside, Haiti is threatened by natural disasters, mainly hurricanes, floods and earthquakes. More than 93% of the country and more than 96% of the population are vulnerable to such disasters. Recovery efforts continue more than two years after Hurricane Matthew struck in 2016, causing loss and damage valued at 32% of 2015 GDP.

Source: [www.worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org)





**An electrician professor installs lights in the Imagine Missions compound to provide better security.**

With the battle of raw materials seemingly tackled, I moved on to other issues. Consistency and quality of products was the next challenge, which warranted the use of visual aids and my knowledge of workflow design. Visual aids were the greatest way to ensure that classes crafting products were producing only those that were marketable, and pictures are worth a thousand words in any language.

Once students began to make products, I photographed examples of the good, the bad and the ugly (in the eyes of American consumers) so each professor knew how to properly instruct



**Plumbing class students McKinley and Jude (top) install plumbing for drinking water while tiling class students Louis Mark, Kerson and Orlando (bottom) practice laying tile.**

and translated them in advance, hoping to purchase the right items at the market. The whole process was such a headache it caused teachers to go long periods without the materials needed to teach. It became obvious something needed to change.

Thankfully, I'm an IE and love changing processes. After crafting a flowchart of possibilities, it became apparent the most effective way to source and obtain materials was for professors to purchase their own supplies. But handing

students. For example, bracelets full of beads depicting the Haitian flag and made for a petite Haitian wrist would not be as marketable as an adjustable, multicolored bracelet.

Our professors were the greatest help in enacting this process of "quality control" because they were not interested in accepting anything less than perfection from students. Once we were on the same page about the look of our products, visual aids served as reminders to professors, who then ran the show. I always heard successful people talk about how empowering your team is the best way to achieve results. Throughout our supply chain setup, I've learned just how true that is.

Since June 2018 when I started this journey, I experienced countless failures and miscommunications. But the end goal is too good to give up. I add processes and eliminate those that prove ineffectual to try and create a professional school that is empowering for our teachers and students alike. I don't plan on staying in Haiti forever, so every time I implement something new, I must ask: "Will this be successful when I leave?"

The answer must be "yes." The need for effective training and true employment is too great, and the lives of Imagine Missions' professors and students alike are too important. ❖

out money wasn't the way to go about it; checks and balances are important in any organization. I created an order form for teachers they had to fill out to request money for materials. They had to relate their purchase to a specific objective from their curriculum and give an estimated cost per item. I would take those estimates and run them past a few trusted advisers to validate the costs. Once validated, I would provide the money requested and require professors to return a revised form listing actual costs paid, as receipts aren't provided at markets where most items are purchased. The professors rose to the occasion and proved responsible and consistent in restocking their raw materials.

*Lauren Neder is a native of Erie, Pennsylvania, who earned her bachelor's degree in industrial engineering from Purdue University in 2014. At Purdue, she was a resident assistant and part of the Society of Women Engineers. She previously worked for four years in manufacturing for Frito Lay in different managerial and process improvement roles. After finishing her work in Haiti with Imagine Missions, she plans to return to her home in Lynchburg, Virginia, to seek a career path in "something that is socially conscious and makes an impact." Those interested in partnering with Imagine Missions can visit its website and learn about sponsorship options at [www.imagemissions.org/professional-school](http://www.imagemissions.org/professional-school). Donations are tax deductible.*