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[Home](#) > [Press Releases](#) > Georgia Southern Employee Cares for Haitian Orphans with AIDS

Georgia Southern Employee Cares for Haitian Orphans with AIDS

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STATESBORO, Ga. – Marie Denis-Luque enjoys her job as a research project manager in the Jiann-Ping Hsu College of Public Health, at Georgia Southern University in Statesboro, Ga. However, she admits she found her true calling many miles away in a place she once called home. She is the founder and executive director of Caring for Haitian Orphans with AIDS (CHOAIDS), a home in the Haitian city of Port-au-Prince that cares for HIV-positive children.

Denis-Luque arrived in Tallahassee, Fla., from Haiti when she was just 15-years-old with her two sisters to live with her father, stepmother and their two children. A return visit to Haiti in 2003 when she was beginning research as a public health graduate student at the University of South Florida changed the course of her life's journey. In Port-au-Prince, she met Valcuse, a 13-year-old HIV-positive girl who was living in a hospital courtyard because her guardian had abandoned her. "I put myself in her shoes and started thinking, 'what if my dad hadn't gone to the United States – a lot of what ifs – this could have been me,'" she said.

According to UNAIDS, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/ AIDS, between 13,000 and 16,000 children aged 0 to 14 are living with HIV in Haiti. For many of them that diagnosis is a death sentence because their access to antiretroviral drugs is limited. Denis-Luque adds, because they have HIV, some people treat the kids as outcasts. "They are taken advantage of because their parents are dead and the people entrusted to care for them such as a neighbor or an aunt or uncle will use them to collect money from aid agencies, and then leave them at hospitals when they get sick," she explained.

Denis-Luque says Valcuse's story haunted her for weeks. When she returned to Florida, she raised \$500 from friends and family and sent it to the nurse and counselor who first introduced her to Valcuse, who has since died. But the girl's desperate situation prompted Denis-Luque to create a special home for HIV-positive kids, and a model of care in which HIV-positive women would serve as live-in "house mothers" for the orphans. "We provide everything like a mom and dad would provide," she said. "They go to school with the other children in the community and we pay the costs."

Thirty-six children have found a home at CHOIDS since it opened its doors nine years ago. Currently, 14 girls and six boys share a three-bedroom rental duplex with a courtyard. They are cared for by a full-time project coordinator, three live-in "house mothers," a part-time nurse, a tutor and an unpaid volunteer. Several of the youngsters are critically ill, but others are thriving. "When you go to the house you see kids jumping around, reading, singing and doing things that all children do. I want them to have normal lives." Denis-Luque continued her main challenge is "funding to keep the home operating. We really rely on the kindness of people's hearts for funds. I want people to know that a lot of work can be done for just a little money. This past year it cost us about \$60,000 to run the organization and that included a small stipend for our dedicated staff, schooling for the kids, hospital care, housing and everything."

CHOIDS gets some outside help from a few church organizations in the U.S., but the home's director is hoping for more donations and assistance from other unpaid volunteers. "I want this place to outlast me," said Denis-Luque.

For more information about CHOIDS visit www.choaids.org. For more information about HIV in Haiti visit <http://www.unaids.org/en/regionscountries/countries/haiti/>

[< Previous](#)

[Next >](#)

