

ALUMNI PROFILE: BRIAN CONCANNON

Brian Concannon (L'89) rushes off the train and out of New York's Penn Station, dragging his laptop and red suitcase behind him. He has a message to deliver.

Concannon's day started in Washington, where he had spoken at a congressional briefing organized by the O'Neill Institute for National and Global Health Law the day before. He boarded an early morning train to Philadelphia, where he delivered a speech to students, then hopped back on another train, which brought him to New York City, where he's meeting with an international lawyer on the staff of a member state's mission to the United Nations.

At every stop, Concannon describes the grim situation in Haiti. More than a half-million Haitians remain homeless after the devastating earthquake of January 12, 2010, many living in makeshift shelters of plastic tarp and scraps of wood. The lack of clean water and waste disposal systems throughout the country has contributed to the spread of disease. Four out of five Haitians are unemployed, most children are not in school, and the per capita income is less than \$2 per day. Perhaps the most devastating recent development in Haiti is the outbreak of cholera, which has killed over 7,000 Haitians and sickened a half-million more.

To most, the way to alleviate Haiti's suffering involves providing food, shelter and emergency medical care. But Concannon, founder and executive director of the Institute for Justice & Democracy in Haiti, explains that the country will only recover if it establishes the rule of law. "The people of Haiti are not poor because they don't work hard," he says. "The people of Haiti are poor because they can't enforce their rights." He rattles off a list of fundamental rights Americans take for granted — the right to enforce a contract, the right to be treated fairly as a citizen complaining of official misconduct, the right to possess and leverage clear title to property — all of which are largely absent in Haiti.

So Concannon and the Boston-based IJDH, along with its sister Port-au-Prince-based organization the *Bureau des Avocats Internationaux*, have launched a human rights-based response to Haiti's tragedies. They have filed lawsuits to slow the pace of mass evictions from the temporary camps housing earthquake victims and have pushed criminal complaints and mobilized support groups that helped stop a surge in sexual assaults in the chaotic camp settings. They have also represented thousands of victims of the deadly cholera outbreak caused by shoddy waste disposal practices at a United Nations base in central Haiti. Concannon and his team are helping many of their families pursue a historic claim asking the U.N.



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to take the lead in building desperately needed water and sewage systems in Haiti. If successful, the case could save tens of thousands of lives there.

Concannon traces his commitment to social justice in part to his experience at Georgetown Law. "The Juvenile Justice Clinic and Wally Mlyniec taught me lessons about working with victims of structural injustice that I apply every week," Concannon says.

After practicing law three years with the Boston firm of Mintz Levin, Concannon began working in Haiti in 1995.

Together with Haitian attorney Mario

Joseph, Concannon helped prosecute those responsible for a brutal 1994 army and paramilitary attack on Haitian civilians in the community of Raboteau. The Raboteau trial convicted the top military and paramilitary leaders of Haiti's de facto dictatorship, and led to the deportation of the highest ranked military officer ever deported from the U.S. on human rights grounds. Concannon also won the first-ever Haitian case at the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, on behalf of former political prisoner and Prime Minister Yvon Neptune. The Raboteau prosecution is widely considered to be the most important Haitian human rights case ever brought to trial and a blow to Haiti's legacy of impunity for the powerful. It is the model for a potential prosecution of former Haitian dictator Jean-Claude Duvalier, another case Concannon and Joseph are pursuing.

Concannon returned to the U.S. in 2004 to found IJDH as a U.S.-based partner for the ground-level work being done by Joseph and other Haitian attorneys at the BAI. Nancy Reimer (L'89), a classmate of Concannon's at the Law Center and a partner at the Boston office of LeClairRyan, is a key supporter of IJDH. "At Georgetown, we learned that you need to closely examine your beliefs and then act on them," Reimer says. "That is what Brian does — he sets out to right the wrongs and then he sees it through."

Concannon deflects such praise, delivering credit to others who have worked hard for justice in Haiti. U.S. volunteer lawyers and law students, including Georgetown Law students, have researched and drafted litigation documents and prepared reports submitted to the United Nations and other international bodies. In delivering his message of human rights in Haiti, Concannon regularly cites a well-known Haitian proverb, "*Men anpil, chay pa lou*" — "Many hands make the load light."

— By Fran Quigley

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