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- [Home](#)
 - [Consumer](#)
 - St. Louis Smiles: Humanitarian Efforts Changing One Life at a Time

St. Louis Smiles: Humanitarian Efforts Changing One Life at a Time

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After a tragic accident left both of his arms severely burned, Kesmy St. Louis underwent a double amputation. St. Louis was 12 years old when he suffered a severe seizure, which caused him to fall in an outdoor fire pit that his family used for cooking. His injuries resulted in the amputation of both of his arms above the elbows. Through the kindness of a stranger named Ann Hume, the Bon Samaritan organization, and Wright & Filippis Inc., with headquarters in Rochester Hills, Michigan, this boy from the Republic of Haiti was given a second chance at life.

Occupying the western third of the Caribbean island of Hispaniola, Haiti is one of the poorest countries in the world, with 75 percent of its population living below the poverty line. More than half of the population is unemployed, and the annual income is \$350 per capita. About 70 percent of the population is illiterate. The life expectancy of a Haitian is only 54, and one of every five Haitian children dies of malnutrition, dehydration, or diarrhea, according to The Friends of the Children of Haiti (www.fotcoh.org).

"There's very little healthcare available in Haiti," explains Joe Kuerth, CP, Wright & Filippis, Alpena, Michigan. "Even in the hospital he was taken to, his burns were treated with herbs and homeopathic remedies."

Hume, who works as a nurse in Lincoln, Michigan, was doing humanitarian work in Haiti in the 1990s when she met St. Louis. She was familiar with Wright & Filippis, and contacted the company upon her return to Michigan to see if the company would be interested in helping the boy.

"She contacted me out of the blue one day," says Kuerth. "I, in turn, contacted our administrators and got the ball rolling on this project."

Hume arranged for the boy to travel to Detroit and be treated at Children's Hospital of Michigan. There he received expert medical care for his ongoing seizures as well as for his amputations. However, Kuerth learned that when St. Louis first received prostheses as a child, he did not use them.

"We wanted to make sure that he didn't come all this way, that we would make him his arms and that then they wouldn't sit in a corner unused," says Kuerth. "His arms had to be light and very durable. They also had to be low maintenance because he'd be returning to Haiti."

St. Louis was fitted with bilateral, body-powered arms with hooks on both sides. Because temperatures in Haiti often hover above 90 degrees with extreme humidity on the coasts, Kuerth says climate was a big issue when designing and making his arms. "We couldn't give him something that was going to be too hot to wear," Kuerth says. "The body-powered arms are more comfortably worn over a T-shirt, but it's so hot in Haiti that even a T-shirt can be too hot to wear. We had to work around those types of issues to ensure that we would provide him with something useful."

Because St. Louis has very short residual limbs, it took a team effort to make his prostheses. Along with Kuerth, team leader Rob Wagner, an upper-extremity specialist, and Suzie Williams worked on St. Louis. "It was almost like fitting him with shoulders because the amputation was so high up," says Kuerth.

St. Louis received his prostheses in January 2007 after several trips between Michigan and Haiti. "Each time he came to Michigan, he'd have to apply for a visa," explains Kuerth. "He could only stay for a short while." Therefore, the team combined things normally done in separate appointments into only three visits. St. Louis, who also received occupational therapy while in Michigan, can now feed and groom himself—tasks he had performed with his feet before getting prosthetic arms. "The arms changed his life and gave him independence," Kuerth comments. "He has much more confidence and self-esteem and says he feels better about himself."

Thanks to Kuerth and the rest of the prosthetic team, along with a generous donation by the Filippis Foundation, St. Louis, now 20 years old, is able to help support his large family using his new prosthetic arms. He has learned to read and write and is using those skills to teach others, mainly orphans, in the Bon Samaritan mission project. Bon Samaritan is a Christian-based mission located in Montrouis, Haiti, that provides education, food, and healthcare to Haitians.

"Kesmy is one of these guys that you can't help but like," says Kuerth. "He's warm, intelligent, humble, and he's very appreciative. He also has a great smile. We couldn't have picked a nicer person to do this for." Kuerth adds that the experience not only changed St. Louis' life, but also his own. "This has made me realize how much we have here," he says. "They have nothing in Haiti, and there are so many other places that have horrible conditions. There's no way [St. Louis] could have received the care that we provided him in his country. I think it's only fitting that the wealthiest country in the Western Hemisphere would have the opportunity to help someone from the poorest."

Kuerth and his team have treated St. Louis for years, but he explains that this is just one example of the many Filippis Foundation-funded humanitarian initiatives. "Wright & Filippis is known in this area for its many service projects and philanthropic efforts," he says. Recently, Wright & Filippis sent a container filled with orthotics, prosthetics, and durable medical equipment to Ghana, Africa—the fourth shipment of its kind to the impoverished country.

Wright & Filippis will continue to support humanitarian projects such as this one, and they're proud of their prosthetists who help with these initiatives. "They've made real personal investments and it means a lot to them," says Mike Murray, marketing communications director at Wright & Filippis.

Kuerth says Hume has already contacted him to help with a man who is an above-knee amputee. "We're going to do it all again!" Kuerth says enthusiastically.



From left: Joe Kuerth, CP; Rob Wagner; and Suzie Williams make adjustments to Kesmy St. Louis' body-powered arms.

St. Louis shines as an example of the life-changing power of O&P humanitarian efforts worldwide. He says he is grateful for the blessings that have been provided to him, and he'd like to help others in his country by becoming a minister someday. With his new prosthetic arms, St. Louis is able to pursue dreams he never knew were possible before and is able to propagate the kindness strangers have showed him.

The Healing Hands for Haiti International Foundation Inc. (HHH) has been providing O&P supplies and services to Haitians since 1998. Currently, there are four full-time Haitian technicians who produce nearly all of the limbs and braces from the HHH clinic in the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince. For more information, visit www.healinghandsforhaiti.org

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