

Survivors of Modern Child Slavery

This interview is the first in a series of conversations with former child slaves in contemporary times. These stories accompany an introductory booklet entitled *Modern Child Slavery: The Coercion and Exploitation of Youth Worldwide* and other educational materials produced by Youth Advocate Program International to address the abusive practices that make children vulnerable to slavery and to stimulate the creation of protections for children in the emerging global economy.

Given Away: An Interview with Jean-Robert Cadet

by Aysha Upchurch

Jean-Robert Cadet, a former enslaved restavec child in Haiti, has overcome his exploited childhood to educate others about this abusive practice. He is the author of *Restavec: From Haitian Slave Child to Middle-Class American* (University of Texas Press, 1998). Cadet founded the Restavec Foundation in 2000 to combat child slavery in his native country, where over 300,000 children are estimated to be enslaved under the restavec system. Restavec is Creole for “stay with.” Each year, thousands of children are sent by their poor families to stay with wealthier families who abuse the children in forced domestic servitude.

Q: Would you say the circumstances that led you to be a restavec were unusual?

Cadet: The norm is that a well-to-do family asks a poor family, with a lot of mouths to feed, to take one of their children. The child would perform domestic work for the rich family, who in exchange would promise that child would get food, learn a trade and then go back to the village and help their family out of poverty. That’s what is promised but the promise is never delivered.

Once the child is acquired, the child becomes a slave and the natural parents have no way of finding out what happened to their child.

So usually that's the norm. But my case was different. My father was very wealthy, a white man who had a lot of businesses—he was a coffee producer and exporter and my mother, a black woman, was his maid and a cook in his factory. My mother died when I was four years old, and my father, too ashamed to raise me as his son because of my African features, gave me to someone as a gift. In my case there were no promises.

Q: How was it communicated to you what you would be doing?

Cadet: It was never communicated to me. At the age of four, I was given a broom and I was told to sweep the yard. As I got older my duties increased. Early in the morning I had to wash the car, take up after the dog, and empty and change the chamber pot. I never knew any other life than doing domestic chores all my childhood.

Q: What was a typical daily routine?

Cadet: I would get up at 5 or 5:30 a.m. and sweep the yard, empty and wash the chamber pot, water the plants, wash the car—actually, I would first prepare the master's bath water and if there's water left, use that to wash the car. Then I had to set the table for breakfast and clean it when everyone was done. Then I would mop the floors, make the beds, clean the bathrooms, dust the furniture, and run errands. If their friends decided they want to borrow me, then their friends would borrow me and I would do for them the same chores I did at my house....

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Q: So multiple people could use you as a restavec then?

Cadet: Of course. Friends of the family would come and say "May I borrow Bobby today?" or "Can I use your little boy?" That's the way it works. It's been going on since 1804, and it's still going on today.

Q: Did they make you eat outside?

Cadet: Of course I ate outside, I couldn't eat inside the house. I had to eat after the adults finished eating. I ate whatever was left from the table, and usually this was not enough so I would cook cornmeal to supplement whatever was left. That's the way restavec children are treated, even today.

Q: Where did you sleep?

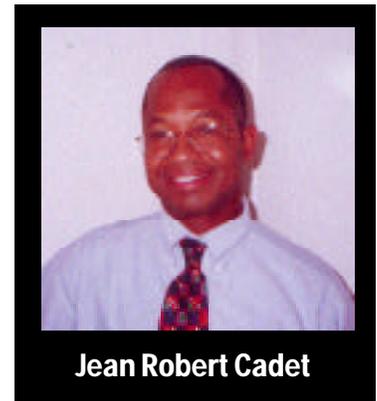
Cadet: I never had a bed. Every night I slept under the kitchen table on a couple of old dresses, about four or five of them. They were rags, and that's what I would use as bedding.

Q: Were there other children in the house?

Cadet: Sure, they had a little girl. She was doing the laundry. Her health was fragile; she was coughing and had a fever. She was sick often. Instead of taking her to a hospital or a doctor, they put her in a taxi and she disappeared.

Q: She was another restavec?

Cadet: Yes. Were you talking about the family's children?



Jean Robert Cadet

Q: Yes, the family's children

Cadet: Yes, they had two children. The little girl was born first and I was 8,9, or 10 and then a year later a boy was born. I had to wash the baby's diapers, boil the bottles, baby-sit and take care of the kids. The restavec children have to call the babies (children of the masters), mister or mademoiselle. So really the restavec child is not even a person. He or she is not treated as a human being.

Q: Describe the relationship between you and the master family.

Cadet: Well, I didn't have a relationship with them. I was there to work. I couldn't sit at the table and eat with them, go to weddings with them, or go to the movies. If I was sick and had some needs, I couldn't communicate my needs because restavec children are not allowed to talk until spoken to. So really the relationship was master-slave and I was really controlled by violence. If I didn't do certain things, then I would get beat up. The fear of getting beat up would compel me to do everything I was supposed to do. So really there was no relationship. To me a relationship means communicating with the person and the person communicates with you. If you have a need [as a child], you express it and the adult will fulfill that need. So in a restavec situation, there is no such a thing as a relationship. The child is like a machine. The machine is fueled by a minimal amount of food, a little bit of sleep and that's it.

Q: When you say you were beaten up, what kind of abuse did you suffer?

Cadet: Beating up...In Haiti, you can purchase a whip. One is for children 4 to 8 years old and then there is one that is a lot heavier that is made with cowhide stitched together. It's a long whip. They used the whips in colonial times, but they are still making them today. These are the whips that they used to beat me and the whip is hung on the kitchen wall as a reminder. So everyday, I would have to look at it and I knew that if I did not do my chores or didn't do them well enough I was going to get beat up. I was going to get a whipping with that whip. And if the person is too lazy to get the whip, they will beat you with a shoe. That's the way it was and that's the way it is.

Q: Did you ever question your situation?

Cadet: No, I never questioned it because I didn't know something better. I didn't grow up having a normal life like children with mothers or fathers in their home. I grew up doing domestic chores in the home. I grew up knowing I only had one pair of pants, one

pair of shorts and one shirt, and no shoes. I used to look around me and see the well-dressed kids walking with their mother and fathers to school. To me it was normal [to be a restavec] because I never experienced any other life.

It's like a kid whose father is Rockefeller. He grows up rich and doesn't know what it means to be poor. He can't imagine himself being poor and knows no other life than his rich life. So if you were to suddenly remove all the material things and tell him to clean the floor, the kid would be like, "hey what's going on?" So for me, if somebody all of a sudden were to say to me from now on you

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will not sleep under the kitchen table, you will eat at the table with everyone else I would be like, “hey, what’s going on?” Since I never knew any other life but the life of a slave, to me that was normal.

Q: How is it that you ceased to be a restavec?

Cadet: The family moved the United States and a year later they sent for me. In Haiti they had me, they had two children, and it was a family of five. Now that they were living in New York and missed the work I did for them, they sent for me. But one thing they didn’t think about was the law in the U.S. that stated I had to go to school. If I didn’t go to school, they would be in trouble with the law. So they sent me to school. But they realized that their own children and I were going to the same school. I was calling the children mister and mademoiselle in the house [but going to the same school], and that can’t work very well. So they asked me to leave. They really kicked me out of the house.

Q: Is that the normal process for restavecs when they become a certain age? Does the master just kick them out?

Cadet: Usually, in Haiti, when the child reaches a certain age, around 16 or 17, the boys rebel because they can’t take the beating anymore and they decide to run away. When they runaway, the masters don’t go after them. They go to the village and get another child, much younger because the much younger child will not rebel or run away.

Q: What are some challenges you faced reintegrating into society as a free person and not as a slave?

Cadet: Well, I didn’t understand American racism. I was a child, barely 16 and suddenly I was living in the streets, I was homeless. Some nights I was sleeping in laundromats. I didn’t understand American racism until I started to learn English. I

had a friend who happened to be white and I went to her house and her parents said they don’t ever want her to bring this boy (me) into their home anymore. “We don’t associate with black kids.” The racial thing was a challenge. I was trying to understand the American culture.

Q: How would you describe your sense of freedom or understanding what that meant?

Cadet: Frankly, I didn’t want to be free. I was in a foreign land, I didn’t speak English. The [master’s family] was very mean to me in the house. They didn’t want restavec clothes in their washing machine. They made me go to the laundromat when my clothes were dirty because they didn’t want my clothes mixed with their clothes. I had to call their kids mister, and I didn’t like that but at the same time it was better than being free in a country where I didn’t know anybody and where I didn’t speak the language. So there was this little church I used to go to and I would pray, “God, please improve my condition. Make these people treat me better.” Then God turned around, well He didn’t turn around, but these people kicked me out. I was very angry at God because I kept asking Him to make my life better and then I didn’t have a place to sleep, nowhere to go to eat, and I was sleeping and eating in the street.

Now that I look at it, that’s the best thing God could have done for me. Because of that freedom I was able to reinvent my life and reinvent myself. I was going to school. I found a teacher who cared about me and he found me a roommate. I started working at a gas station. I graduated from high school and then I joined the army.

Q: With the Restavec foundation, what have you accomplished and what do you still hope to accomplish?

Cadet: It took me a while to get a budget to travel to raise international awareness, which is very very

important. I was able to get my book published in French, and soon it will be published in Spanish. I spoke at the United Nations in New York and Geneva about the evil of the restavec institution. Now I am trying to set up a pilot program in Haiti to sensitize school children who have restavecs at home.

Let me tell you what it's like in Haiti, especially during school days. You'll walk down the street and see a bunch of kids going to school. You know they're going to school because they have the nice uniform—blue shirt, khaki pants. Then you see a child wearing rags carrying the book bag of the child wearing the uniform. When this child wearing the uniform is about to cross the street, you see the restavec child hold his hand to cross the street, walk him to school. Then when they reach the school gate, the restavec child hands over the book bag and the well dressed child goes through the gate and the restavec child goes home to his master's house to wash clothes, do the dishes, etc.

Now, what I am trying to do is sensitize the children that go to school, private school [who have restavecs in their homes]. The program has a social worker go to the school and talk to those kids about restavec children - what it's like for the restavecs, why it is that you can go to the school, but the restavec child can not. It's a program where I have movies that the children can see about restavecs or they have a workbook where they can see and draw pictures, write, or have someone read to them about a day in the life of a restavec child. [I'm trying to] sensitize the children so that when they grow up they will not have restavecs. The adults already know and all their lives they have had restavecs, so they are perpetuating the same

system. If you educate the children at the elementary level, when they become adults they will not perpetuate child slavery.

Q: Do you ever talk to adults or families about what happens to their children? How do they react when you tell them what is going to happen?

Cadet: Some of them cry, some of them say they didn't know, and some of them say they knew but were hoping the person they were talking to would do what they promise. Some of them say, they know what their child is, but they can't afford bus fare or taxi fare because they already have four to five mouths to feed.

Q: What do you see as the biggest obstacle to ending the restavec system in Haiti?

Cadet: The big obstacle I would say is the government. I received a book that President Aristide wrote in 1999, and in one chapter, the president said, "I hope one day the restavec

children will be able to sit at the dinner table with their masters." So what does that tell you about the government? It means that eliminating the restavec *system* is not a priority. Some government officials have restavec children in their homes. But with the work I'm doing in raising international awareness, eventually the government will cave in because they will see that people are laughing at us and people don't see us as a country because we have child slavery. Eventually they will be compelled to do something.

Many people in Haiti don't see destitute children as having the same rights as children with a family, children of the middle class and children of the rich. People who have restavec children in

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their homes, purposely leave the restavec in rags so their children will not be mistaken for the restavec. If they dress the restavec the same as their own children, people would not know which is which because everyone looks the same, has black skin. They don't want anyone to mistake their children for restavecs. So the restavec child eats outside on a rock, eating in the yard, not even eating the same food.

Q: How did you deal with having been a slave?

Cadet: I am still dealing with it. When you spend your entire childhood in that situation, your foundation as a person is affected by it. A house with a faulty foundation will not stand solidly. I have nightmares two to three times a week, severe nightmares, where I wake up screaming. When somebody's upset with you, you take it as this person hates me. Because as a restavec child, you're so used to people being angry with you everyday, that whenever you look at someone and the person seems upset, you automatically think this person's upset with me and I need to get away from here.

I'm married and I have a family, but when my wife looks angry, I just walk out the house. She's not angry with me, but just looking at her [looking] angry, I just feel...I don't want conflict. Restavec children avoid conflict. You're

conditioned to think and react a certain way and this is your foundation and this is the way you act as an adult. ❖

Since this interview, Cadet has again visited Geneva where he received prime time coverage on Swiss television. He also spoke with the International Labour Organization Secretary General, Mr. Juan Somavia, regarding the sensitizing campaign in Haiti. A French network accompanied Cadet to Haiti in December 2002 to film a 30-minute documentary on the plight of current restavecs and former restavec children now living in the streets. The documentary aired worldwide on February 6, 2003, and is shown on U.S. cable station TV5 in French.

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