

# Personal Story

## Block-Making in Haiti



### Fred Elicart, Owner Speedy's Block

Back in the late 80's, all Fred Elicart wanted was a car. He wanted the freedom to easily go anywhere he wanted, without having to depend on Haiti's unreliable public transportation. So he asked his uncle who was in the block-making business for advice regarding what he should do to get a car. His uncle asked him what means he had to make a living, such as what type of work he did or if he had a business. Fred told his uncle that he didn't have any means, as he wasn't working nor did he have a business. So his uncle asked him what he planned to do with the car. That's when Fred realized he had no idea. He just knew that he wanted a car to get around freely and easily. Upon hearing this, his uncle told him that he should look to do something that will make him money instead of costing him money, a lesson Fred holds dear to him until today.

After that conversation, Fred started thinking heavily about what his uncle told him and decided to look into the idea of starting a business. But Fred always knew that he didn't really have the mindset to have a business. The uncle continued to encourage Fred and suggested that he purchase a machine to make blocks instead of purchasing a car. "But I don't know anything about making blocks," Fred told his uncle. The uncle responded by saying, "Just come by my block-making business for a couple of days to see how it's done and you can take it from there."

Fred did as his uncle suggested and in a couple of days' time, he grew enough of an appreciation for making blocks that he went to the bank and got the money he needed to purchase the machine. Once he had the machine, he needed a site and found plot of land from a family member. But the lot needed to be cleared and prepared to manufacture the blocks. So Fred tapped a friend who had access to a tractor and this friend helped him every Saturday until he was able to open his own block-making business. Fred proudly recalls, "I made my first block on September 9, 1988 and the rest, as they say, is history."

All was going fairly well for Fred and Speedy's Block until the afternoon of January 12, 2010, when a magnitude 7.0 earthquake hit the major metropolitan city of Port-au-Prince, Haiti's capital. "The earthquake took everyone by surprise and all businesses were hit hard," says Fred. "The only other time that my business was so severely affected," recalls Fred "was during the political unrest of 2004 when the business ground to a halt as a result of safety concerns in Haiti at the time."

Fred really wasn't sure how he was going to restart his business after the devastating earthquake. Then, through a chance encounter with Save the Children, the world's leading independent organization for children, Fred was invited to participate in a livelihoods project to receive training and technical assistance to improve his small business. Save the Children initially conducted a study of how local small businesses were impacted by the earthquake. The organization

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then established a partnership with Build Change to provide block-makers with the technical assistance necessary to learn how to produce better blocks, using quality ingredients in properly mixed proportions.

When Build Change started working with Fred, the strength of his blocks was averaging 4 MPa or megaPascals, which is a technical unit used to measure block strength. At the end of the training, the quality of his blocks had improved and his blocks were averaging 9 MPa.

The technical training covered the basic principles of good concrete mixing practices, which include:

- Using the right size container (bucket) to batch out concrete mixes. Fred was using a wheelbarrow before which produced more, but weaker blocks.
- Proper mixing of the concrete ingredients by turning them over 3 times dry, until the color is uniformed.
- Curing blocks for a minimum of 7 days and selling them only after they've sat for a minimum of 18 days.

Build Change has also introduced Fred to basic record-keeping for block production, which will help him know whether he is profitable or not. As a result of this assistance, Fred was able to hire 1 additional regular staff person for a total of 3, as well as augment his variable production staff from 4 to 14, depending on the work load. He's gone from producing 400 blocks a day to about 1500. Fred estimates that with a mixer however, he could produce about 2500 blocks a day.

Fred is well on his way to becoming a successful, medium-level block producer after receiving Build Change's training and a mechanical vibrator from Save the Children, a device which will help him to increase his production capacity. One challenge with which Fred will have to contend is getting his customers to pay more for the higher quality blocks. Since he is using more cement than he used to when he was using a wheelbarrow for batching, customers will need to be educated on the higher cost blocks that are essential to building safe houses that can withstand another major earthquake.

"It's a great experience for me to see that I too can make good blocks," exclaimed Fred. "It's not just the big manufacturers that can, but the small ones too." He continues, "We just have to follow the good practices that Build Change taught us, such as using the right proportion mix, keeping the blocks wet and in the shade, etc. and we'll all be making better blocks."

