

Q&A with Guerline Pierre

Guerline Pierre received her Master's in Public Health in 2012 from Montclair State University. In addition to being an I-RISE Support Services and Refugee Health Promotion Program Manager, she continues to do outreach to the migrant farm community, a population that is underrepresented and overburdened with the struggle to obtain the barest necessities of life.

What did you do prior to working at I-RISE – what's your background?

“Just prior to I-RISE, I was a stay-at-home mom. I gave birth to my daughter in 2020, and it was during the pandemic, of course. Prior to that, when I was working towards my Master's degree in Public Health, I traveled to places like South Africa and Peru, doing a lot of service learning, and I also traveled to Haiti quite a bit (between 2009 and 2015). One of the things that inspired me to travel to Haiti, and to pursue my Master's in Public Health was a book written about Dr. Paul Farmer and his journey, “Mountains Beyond Mountains”. (*Dr. Farmer co-founded Partners in Health*).

“That book changed my life and changed the course of how I wanted to live a purposeful life. I wanted to change people's lives and kind of follow in his footsteps. I was an outreach and community health worker for 8 years in East Orange, working with the Haitian population, focusing on expectant mothers.”

How did your background prepare you for the challenges that you meet with your I-RISE clients?

“One population that I used to work with were the Haitian migrant farm workers in south Jersey. I have to say that was probably the first group of Haitians that I witnessed and worked with when I moved to there. Haitians migrating from Georgia and Florida to harvest blueberries. So I started doing that work through Gloucester County Special Services – I was a migrant education outreach worker. I would go to the various blueberry camps and recruit the children of the farm workers to partake in summer school to keep them out of the fields and engage them in fun and academic activities.

“I feel like experiences like these prepared me in some way to do the work here at I-RISE. I feel like they were preparing me for what was to come.”



Is there an instance that you can recall from the past few years working with Haitian clients that made you want to shout for joy? Conversely, can you recall an instance that brought you great sadness?

“There are lots of those moments. Just last night, my client sent me a picture of them in their Home Health Aid uniform, as they’re completing their course. I’m excited for them because they felt that being in that uniform and taking that class is so empowering! I felt so excited when I took my clients to the beach, because for a lot of them, it was their first time visiting a beach in the States. Just taking that time with them – we sat in a circle and had a picnic on the sand, we shared our food, and they shared their stories with one another. That was the happiest moment working for I-RISE, because I could



just step back and watch them connect with each other. Because that’s ultimately what we want – to build that sense of community.

“The most disappointing moments are the most recent. Clients were pretty much in a place of self-sufficiency. They were able to secure their own lease, furnish their own home, secure work on their own, work full-time, go to school. And then with this current Administration, just like that, with a snap of a finger, all that just turned around. Now I have these clients who were once self-sufficient who are not, and now we have to start all over. They have to think about how they’re going to access benefits, how they’re going to survive. Many of them are going to end up homeless or evicted. So right now that’s my biggest concern. This is how we treat humans – it doesn’t make sense.”

You, along with other I-RISE staff who are from Haiti or are of Haitian descent, are in the middle of a marathon fundraising campaign. Can you tell our readers a little about Haitian Voices for Immigrants?

“It’s a collective effort on the part of Haitian I-RISE staff that started after the first asylum self-filing clinic in the Trenton office, and just hearing some of the stories that we heard that day fueled something in us – that we needed to do something more. Folks who came here – they went through a lot to get to this country. We feel like we need to bring more awareness. There are so many people who would like to help, within the Haitian

diaspora and within the Haitian NJ community. We have Haitian dignitaries, politicians, health providers, doctors, church leaders, who want to help, but just don't know how.

"So this is why we decided to organize, so that we can spread the word, and hopefully raise some funds to help with those various gaps and barriers that we struggle with, such as transportation, housing, and food. Things like that to help our clients feel supported. And this isn't just Haitians helping Haitians. Regardless of what country immigrants come from, the needs are always the same.

"At the moment, we're discussing the possibility of an event in November to close the fundraiser – so stay tuned!"

There were recent outings to a zoo and to the beach with I-RISE Haitian clients. Can you reflect on how important outings like this are for our clients under the current hostile political climate?

"The information that they're receiving from TikTok, news outlets, what's going on with ICE within their communities.....The level of fear has surpassed anything I've ever seen before; they question EVERYTHING. They don't want to leave their house, and they're terrified to let their children out. So I thought these activities were a way to kind of softly reassure them that it's ok to come out.



"They had never been to a zoo. To see the expressions on their faces, it was like they were children - it was the most beautiful moment. I think those outings made them feel like a person again. They didn't have to feel like a little mole in their house, isolated, dealing with mental health, dealing with depression and having all kinds of anxiety. They were able to get outside and see something different, to think about other things. Actually, the biggest thing I enjoyed was THE RIDE TO THE DESTINATION! When we get in the car, they're sharing, their laughing, they're sharing jokes and stories about when they were in Haiti, things that they used to do. I'm learning more and more stuff about my clients just from the ride! And they're exchanging phone numbers! That's the biggest thing for me. It's not the trip – NOW, THEY'RE BUILDING COMMUNITY!"

When they're separated from one other and they're inside their homes, and they're in fear, that's the most dangerous thing we can do to a human being."

What final thoughts would you like to leave our readers with about our Haitian neighbors?

"Haiti has the distinction of being the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, but I say Haiti is the RICHEST country in the Western Hemisphere. Haiti has the BIGGEST sense of community. It's very individualistic here in this country; people invest a lot of time in work, work, work, and it's a very fast pace. I have a client who has four children and her husband is at work every day and she misses having family and friends to help with the children, help with the cooking, to walk with her to the market, to have conversations. She's stuck at home all day with the four children and feels disconnected from the world."

"Right now, our clients who are here – they are missing home and they're homesick. Leaving home comes with much sacrifice. If they could go back home and live a safe and good quality life, they would. This has been a reality check for them. They thought the opportunities would be immediate and they'd be able to send lots of money back home. They've never experienced a level of stress like they're experiencing in America right now.

"Haitian people are not broken; it is the system that is broken. Our Haitian neighbors, they're our friends, they're just like us. I feel like we use a lot of labels within society, and I think sometimes we lose the essence of humanity by using these labels. We forget that these are people with hearts who want to live and enjoy life like everyone else."

If you'd like to make a donation to assist I-RISE clients with legal and housing expenses, visit <https://interfaithrise.org/donate/> and make sure you include "Haitian Voices for Immigrants" in the memo. Thank you!