

2010 Finalist—Citizen Services Medal

This award will recognize a federal employee for a significant contribution to the nation in activities related to social services (including economic development and assistance, education, health care, housing, labor and transportation). This medal is accompanied by a \$3,000 award.

Pius Bannis



Position: Field Office Director, Haiti

Agency: [U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services](#)

Location: Port-au-Prince, Haiti

Achievement: Expedited the immigration process to quickly unite more than 1,100 Haitian orphans with their adoptive families in the United States following the devastating earthquake in January 2010.

When the devastating 7.0 magnitude earthquake struck Haiti in January 2010, the nation's orphans were among the most vulnerable. Pius Bannis, a U.S. immigration officer, stepped into the breach to help hundreds of those Haitian orphans—babies, toddlers and teens—escape the tragedy and find safety in the United States.

In the days and weeks following the catastrophe, U.S. citizens in the process of adopting children in Haiti were desperate to gain custody of the youngsters and bring them to the United States, but were stymied because they had not yet completed all of the paperwork and requirements that can take as long as three years.

Aided by the Obama administration's decision to authorize use of humanitarian parole to bring certain orphans to the United States, Bannis, a field office director for U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), logged 20-hour days, seven days a week to identify and screen eligible cases. He ensured the system was not being exploited by child traffickers or others with bad motives, coordinated with the State Department on evacuation arrangements, and dealt with Haitian authorities.

During the first two weeks after the earthquake, Bannis was the sole American immigration official in Haiti handling the adoption needs. He took it upon himself to set up a make-shift day care in the U.S. Embassy in Port-au-Prince, where more than 50 children could be found at any one time, often scared, crying and hungry. He supplied diapers, clean clothes, water and food, and personally drove some of the children to the airport for evacuation flights to the United States.

“What Pius did was the singular most devoted act of public service and humanitarianism that I have seen in all my 30 years in immigration,” said Steve Bucher, deputy associate director of Refugee, Asylum and International Operations at USCIS.

U.S. families adopted 330 Haitian children in all of 2009. Immigration officials said about 1,100 youngsters were allowed to come to the United States through April 2010 as part of the special accelerated program. This enabled their adoptive parents or prospective adoptive parents to remove their children from the devastating conditions of post-earthquake Haiti and bring them to safety. Bannis played a role in each one.

At the same time that Bannis was helping the orphans and their adoptive families, he was providing comfort and support to his Haitian

staff who suffered devastating losses—assisting one colleague who lost her home and all seven members of her family, another who lost a brother, and a third who lost her parents and desperately needed medical treatment for family members with life-threatening injuries.

Bannis' motivation to help the Haitian orphans ran deep, stemming from his humanitarian work in African refugee camps in the early 1990s. He was especially devastated to see the suffering of innocent, helpless children in those camps, and that feeling stayed with him. He said he always takes care of the kids first, and the terrible Haitian earthquake clearly was a time for him to act.

“It was a human reaction to a human tragedy. So many children were dead or dying, and so many were in the process of being adopted. We were all so concerned. My automatic reaction was to take care of them,” Bannis said.

Each family assisted by Bannis has their own story to tell. Thank you letters and e-mails to Bannis, along with photos of the children, have poured into the U.S. Embassy in Haiti and USCIS headquarters.

The family of an adopted girl wrote that “you have dedicated your heart and soul to this matter to ensure that the children have joined their adoptive parents in the United States. What you provided to the children, to Haiti, and to us parents, are immeasurable.”

Another parent wrote, “I want to say thank you for all that you did to help three amazing little boys come from Haiti to the United States to receive surgical care and to have a chance at life! We are so very grateful.”

The severe earthquake and its after-effects resulted in an estimated 220,000 deaths, with many hundreds of thousands left homeless and injured. Of the 117 official government-approved Haitian orphanages, many were left in poor condition or were destroyed in the earthquake.

Originally from the island of Dominica, Bannis is a naturalized American citizen and has worked for the federal government for about 15 years. He went to Haiti in 2008 because he wanted to give back to the children of the Caribbean.

Bannis said he is curious about the hundreds of children who left Haiti and wonders how they are healing and making out in their new lives in the United States. Yet he knows that it is important not to dwell on the situation of one particular child, but rather to focus on the next little one who may need help for a better life.

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