Among the world’s poorest people, Auburn alumnus Valentin Abe ’91 leads a battle for economic survival. His weapon of choice? A single fish. **BY CANDICE DYER**

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**The Fish Farmer’s Story**

At first, he assumed the telephone message was a prank. A voice crisply informed Valentin Abe that he’d been named one of Time magazine’s “100 Most Influential People” of 2010—an eclectic, global Who’s Who that includes Oprah Winfrey, Steve Jobs, Lady Gaga and Barack Obama.

“This Time editor identified her last name as ‘Jones,’ so the whole thing sounded very suspicious from the beginning, like one of my friends playing a joke,” Abe says, shaking his head. “I just laughed and went about my business.”

That business—fish farming in the most remote and destitute corners of Haiti—had caught the eye of former president Bill Clinton, who is the U.N. special envoy to the Caribbean nation. In nominating Abe, he wrote to the magazine: “This year I have been especially influenced by people I’ve met in Haiti who have performed amazing things in the wake of the earthquake and even before, after the four hurricanes. One person in particular is a man from the Ivory Coast named Valentin Abe, 47, who, after graduating from Auburn University, went to Haiti to raise fish and to put more Haitians to work and increase their incomes.”

Of course, food and employment are no joke in the “poorest country in the Western hemisphere,” as Haiti has been defined by rote in news copy for decades, its suffering compounded in January by a 7.0-magnitude earthquake that killed an estimated 230,000 people and displaced 1.2 million others. So this spring, after years of laboring among daub-and-wattle shanties, Abe suddenly found himself in a radically different environment at Time’s annual Lincoln Center gala in New York, poised to promenade between Demi Moore and Taylor Swift down a red-carpet gauntlet of retina-searing flashbulbs and glitz.

“We were so overwhelmed, and my wife was a little freaked out,” he says. “So we asked an organizer if we could just enter quietly through a back door.”

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For about $1,000, a Haitian family can purchase a cage, 2,400 baby tilapia and a four-month supply of fish food. Valentin Abe ’91 and his staff teach would-be entrepreneurs how to raise the fish to marketable size in Lake Azuei, the country’s largest lake.
Instead, during the keynote address, Clinton pointedly hailed the Auburn alumnus as the very “reason for this event” and urged him to say a few impromptu words. Abe, whose ego is inversely proportioned to his accolades, deflected the spotlight toward his adopted country and the spirit of its people. Outlining his micro-enterprise of tilapia hatcheries, he summed up sustainability, in every sense of the word, with elegant, been-there authority: “You cannot write a grant on human dignity.”

Around the room, world leaders and celebrities erupted in applause. Then Abe noticed a reaction that was even more unnerving: His flinty, no-nonsense wife, Ruth Josefina, was weeping. “That’s when it all really hit me,” he says with a laugh.

The tilapia bear coins when grown and gathered in bulk instead of piecemeal, which is exactly what Caribbean Harvest aims to do: Turn impoverished anglers into entrepreneurs by selling their increased yields to grocery stores, restaurants and other vendors for profit. A percentage of the revenue gets channeled into a collective fund that improves access for all to schools, food, medical care and sturdier housing. The old saying comes to mind: “Give a man a fish, and he eats for a day. Teach him to fish, and he eats for a lifetime.” Abe takes the injunction further by showing Haitians how to parlay their catch into community infrastructure, improving life for everyone in the village.

In Haiti, tilapia is no less miraculous and providential. "It is an amazing fish," Abe says, holding aloft a wiggling specimen at his primary hatchery in Croix-des-Bouquets, a small exurb north of Port-au-Prince. “It is known as ‘Jesus’ fish.’ Its morphology has not really changed in 2,000 years.”

Backlit by tropical sunshine, its peachy, iridescent scales seem to radiate a halo—until Abe dispels such fanciful notions. “They are very mean,” he notes, hastily tossing the fish back into a tank.

In Haiti, tilapia is no less miraculous and providential. “Before, we had nothing—nothing,” says Jesulhomme Raphael, a 47-year-old father of six and leader of Madan Belize, one of seven villages targeted by Caribbean Harvest’s program at Lake Azuei, Haiti’s largest inland body of water. “Now we have money for food, clean water, health care, education for our children. It has made life better for all of us. It has meant everything to us—everything.”

Abe's organization regularly hauls potable water to Madan Belize; pays the local school to provide lunch, which, for some kids, is their only meal each day; and recently recruited a social worker to offer counseling on matters such as teen pregnancy.

“Our No. 1 priority is education, followed by nutrition and health care,” Abe says, holding the hands of the children who scamper to greet him in the village. “Next is housing. We try to take care of the elderly while providing work and reasons to keep young people here.”

A dynamic mirroring the relationship between Mexico and the U.S., young Haitians cross the border into “the D.R.,” or Dominican Republic, to work menial jobs at the risk of deportation.
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“I worked in the sugarcane fields in the D.R., where they did not respect my rights and I had to stay in hiding,” says Eliphele Exavier, a 30-year-old with arms made sinewy from swinging a machete. “Now that I have something to do here—I have one cage so far—my life will improve, and I can feed my family without leaving. And here, everything I belong to, not someone else.”

Farmers who excel eventually earn another cage. “I am big on rewards,” Abe says. “This is not a handout; they are invested in what they produce.”

On the rutted dirt road leading to the hatchery, women carry water coolers and baskets of bananas balanced gracefully on their heads, and an elderly farmer lumbers along astride a sway-backed ox laden with just-hacked stalks of sugarcane. Abe nods in his direction and says, “he is going to make clairin,” referring to the Haitian version of moonshine. “That’s not a sight you see much in the United States, but just because this is an impoverished area does not mean that we can’t have the best state-of-the-art technology.” He points to the photovoltaic systems and whirring wind turbines that power his generators. “We are off the grid, so ‘green’ is our only option. Here you can see oxen and solar panels yards away from each other.”

Abe may be modest, but his ambitions are not. If he has his way, within a few years, you will be able to order Caribbean tilapia at the nearest Red Lobster. “These are reachable goals,” he asserts. “We have the potential to produce two million pounds of fish to feed 500,000 people. It is about more than raising just one village out of poverty; we are talking about exports, about creating an industry, an economic engine.”

Any undertaking in this fractured and despoiled landscape requires a rare kind of faith: dry-eyed and unsentimental but also practically oblivious to the naysayers, the daunting odds, the sense of futility that pervades what burned-out diplomats require a rare kind of faith: dry-eyed and unsentimental but also practically oblivious to the naysayers, the daunting odds, the sense of futility that pervades what burned-out diplomats and peacekeepers have labeled a “failed state.” It also helps that Abe, which rhymes roughly with “agape,” has the charisma of a career politician and a smile fit for a toothpaste commercial.

“Val’s personality has opened many doors for him, because he was always able to make new friends easily and was well-liked by everyone that knew him,” recalls one of his mentors, Ron Phelps, an associate professor of fisheries and allied aquacultures at Auburn University. “He can work well independently because he is so self-motivated, but he is also very good at recruiting others when labor is needed.”

Abe grew up the youngest of eight children, fishing on the banks of Ebrié lagoon in a southern neighborhood of Abidjan, the former capital of Ivory Coast. His father was a mechanic, and his mother sold fish at the local market.

“I come from a poor family from one of the city’s poorest neighborhoods,” he says, “but education was very important to my parents. When I was in first and second grades, we had to sit on the floor since there were no chairs and tables. We had to be careful not to dirty our uniforms since most of us had only one, and you could only wash it at the end of the week.”

Abe, always studious, ranked in the top 10 percent of his country’s graduates. Despite family pressure to become a doctor like his older brother, he dreamed of community service as an agronomist, so he studied animal husbandry, specializing in the artificial insemination of cattle. Awarded a prestigious Fulbright scholarship, he had his pick of universities at a time when his government was seeking a fisheries specialist. Some professors were nudging him toward the University of California at Berkeley to research ichthyologic genetics, but he had other plans.

“Every time you open a textbook on fisheries and aquaculture, you will find an Auburn professor quoted and cited—they all are legends,” Abe says of the program that revolutionized the American diet with farm-raised fish. “Lab work is great, but I’m an outdoors guy. When I arrived at Auburn and saw Dr. Ron Phelps standing in water up to his waist in a pond, I knew immediately that I had found my right place in the world.”

Yes, Abe, a Fulbright scholar and urbane “citizen of the world,” who speaks five languages and counsels ex-presidents on nation-building strategies, is also very much a good-ole-boy who likes to eat barbecue, drink beer and get his hands dirty on the job. He used to live it up at the Magnolia Arms apartment complex in Auburn, where he contracted the South’s regional zeal for college football. “Once a Tiger, always a Tiger!” he boasts, adding, “And once you run a hatchery at Auburn, you can run one anywhere in the world.”

Abe earned master’s and doctoral degrees at Auburn in 1991 and 1995, respectively, then kept busy with teaching, consulting and postdoctoral studies at the university’s International Center for Aquaculture and Aquatic Environments. He was part of the team that helped red snapper spawn in captivity for the first time.

“Within the department, our trust in Val was so strong that we proposed him to represent the university in two overseas projects,” Phelps says. “He was always able to keep things organized and on schedule.”
Abe's interests grew international in scope as he worked on short-term projects in Africa and Asia. When an opportunity arose to launch a fish farm in Haiti, his mentors tapped him to lead it. His contract, funded by Rotary International, was supposed to last for six months, but Abe encountered the kind of obstacles that alter best-laid plans all over the world.

“Construction took much longer than six months, and we could not find anybody to run the farm after its completion,” he says. “And to make the matter worse, I met this very attractive lawyer—the person who would later become my wife—three months after I got to Haiti.”

He also fell in love with the place. Asked to stay for two more years to train his replacement, Abe complied. “And that turned into 13 years and counting, with no plans to leave anytime soon,” he says, slicing into a mango. “Haiti is a mixture of the wonderful and the absurd. Yes, there is need, so much need. But, oh, the people! They are so warmhearted, so amazing.”

Abe has a knack—part entrepreneurial, part humanitarian—for spotting opportunities where others see privation. He was stunned to learn that fish are not a dietary staple in an island nation endowed with several large lakes and many ponds, where people chew sugarcane throughout the day to stop their empty bellies from rumbling. Haiti’s inland waters, like the woefully deforested land that surrounds them, had been over-fished.

He rattles off the numbers with frustration: “Did you know that the average Haitian eats only seven pounds of fish per year? That the country imports 12,000 tons of fish, more than 60 percent of it canned or processed? But next door in Jamaica, each person consumes 70 pounds a year. And all of these natural water systems, including a 22,000-acre lake, are just sitting here in Haiti, untouched, in a country with more than 70 percent unemployment.”

The upshot? “I realized the market for fish is huge in Haiti—huge! Fish farming would not only provide nutrition, but also employ the poorest of the poor,” he says, explaining the topsy-turvy real estate dynamics in a country where lakefront property is the least valued and the least developed. As a result, its inhabitants are the most deprived. “One of our villages is accessible only by boat. The children there have never even seen a car or a light bulb, never mind setting foot in a school.”

So Abe, who cannot abide wasted potential, devised a plan for large-scale aquaculture, drawing on methods Auburn researchers had pioneered in Asia. He settled on tilapia because it is remarkably fertile and hardy enough for fresh or salt water; Haiti’s brackish lakes tend to be high in salinity. It was also more familiar to the local diet than catfish.

“So I took my plan to the government,” he recalls. “They said, ‘That’s a nice idea,’ but put it on a shelf and did nothing. I took it to private organizations, which did the same thing. The country was so unstable that no investor wanted to get involved, and no bank would dare issue a loan. I thought, ‘OK, I believe in it. I am convinced this is right for Haiti.’”

So he withdrew his savings to buy three tanks and fish to stock them.

“I would get here at 7 a.m. and be finished with my work by 7:15 a.m.,” he says. “Then I would go sit under the mango tree and read. I did not mind starting small; I looked for a large enough plot of land, because I believed we would expand.”

As a French colony in the early 18th century, Haiti became one of the wealthiest in the Caribbean. African slaves were imported to serve the forestry- and sugar-related industries.
The early years of Caribbean Harvest’s existence were crippled by political violence, like everything else in Haiti. The country’s president, Jean-Paul Aristide, was ousted in a bloody rebellion in 2004. “The streets of Port-au-Prince were literally a war zone, with people getting shot every day,” he says. “Things did not settle down enough for us to really get going at the hatchery until around 2006.”

During this time, a worried Ruth Josefinna, who was born in the Dominican Republic but grew up in Haiti, pleaded with him to move. He always had easier, more comfortable options around the world, including the offer of a position within the Ivory Coast’s Ministry of Agriculture.

“She wanted me to take an academic position and collect a weekly paycheck—a simpler life,” he says. “And she was not wrong in that. Of course I want my family to be safe and secure. But I also felt a commitment to Haiti. One of the reasons so many projects fail here is that most people are unwilling to sacrifice for long-term goals. They come here for a few months, just long enough to have their photos snapped by the newspapers, and then leave. I felt this project was my purpose and, well, sometimes life is just not simple.”

Abe shrugs and sighs. “I figure I was born poor; I came into the world naked. If I lost this money, I would simply work that much harder and make it all over again. It is always better to try, even if you fail, than to do nothing.”

Eventually he and his wife reached a compromise. She and the couple’s three daughters live across the border in the Dominican Republic, near the beach. Abe divides his time between there and a breezy apartment, which he jokingly calls “the king’s castle,” on the outskirts of Port-au-Prince.

And he forged ahead, despite the country’s ceaselessly strained and ramshackle resources—the too-narrow roads of the highway system are considered some of the worst-designed and most perilous in the world, with the concept of “lanes” abstract at best—and entrenched political corruption. He answers most questions about the current regime with an uncharacteristically tight-lipped, sphinx-like smile. Another reason so many projects fail, he explains, is that the idealists and romantics who always have been drawn to Haiti usually do not understand its complicated national character.

“It takes at least two or three years for an outsider to figure out the culture and mentality here,” he says. “You have to look way back and study its entire history.”

Haiti, a word that loosely translates as “high mountains,” was once a French colony of slaves. Africans who spoke the same languages were deliberately kept separated to prevent revolt, so islanders created their own tongue, unique to them, of lilting French laced with African phonetics and grammar: Haitian Creole. (Abe grew up speaking French in Ivory Coast, so he adapted quickly.) It became the first independent nation in Latin America and the first black-led republic in the world when, after years of rebellion, it achieved independence in 1804.

The country’s hard-won distinctions were followed by centuries of misrule and tribulations—the brutal Duvalier dictatorships; death squads of Tonton Macoutes in their trademark black sunglasses; hurricane after battering hurricane. The U.S. Marines occupied and ran Haiti from 1915 to 1934, and more recently helped restore order after former Haitian president Jean-Bertrand Aristide’s removal.

Then came this year’s earthquake. Abe was visiting relatives in Ivory Coast at the time. It destroyed many of the cafes and businesses around Port-au-Prince, where he normally conducts business when he is in town. Fortunately, the quake did little damage to the hatcheries and fishing villages, and left only a hairline fracture in the wall of his apartment, but several of Abe’s friends and neighbors perished, along with many of Caribbean Harvest’s vendors and clients. The city is still strewn with rubble, navigated gingerly by survivors, many of them amputees, who are packed into squalid tent cities and lean-tos on the medians of highways.

Haitians have fatalistic sayings for these vicissitudes: “Je le passe”—whatever happens, happens. And “mountains beyond mountains,” meaning that as soon as one surmounts an obstacle, another looms.

“You see, Haiti is a country that has always been exploited or occupied or hit by one natural disaster after another,” Abe says. “So even well-meaning outsiders with good ideas think they can start a project and boss Haitians around, but the Haitians will not respond well to that. After all they have been through, they are understandably very cautious in their trust. But once you prove to them that you are acting on their behalf, not your own personal agenda, and you gain their trust? Oh, man!

“Dignity is very important to them, and to me. If you respect their dignity, they will treat you like a king.”

Abe is recruiting from the local university’s agronomy program, offering internships and scholarships to groom as many young Haitians as possible for fish farming and community develop-
By the end of the 18th century, Haiti’s nearly half million slaves had revolted against the country’s French colonists. After a prolonged struggle, Haiti became the first black republic to declare independence in 1804.

His development. His first hatchery in Croix-des-Bouquets now boasts 11 employees with a water-analysis lab under construction, and he is completing work on two other sites. Within the next five years, Abe plans to double the number of tanks, generate 3,000 new jobs, furnish each lakeside village with a solar-powered freezer for storage and replace half of Haiti’s imported fish with Caribbean Harvest’s tilapia.

Clinton recently acquired a higher profile as co-chair of the Haiti Recovery Commission, effectively making him the country’s financial CEO. He heard about Caribbean Harvest through the humanitarian-relief grapevine and requested a tour of Abe’s facilities last year.

“He was extremely knowledgeable about fisheries and really knew his way around the tanks,” Abe says, “to the point where he was answering questions instead of me. I had no idea he was nominating me for Time. That came as a complete surprise, but it has been the best P.R. I’ve had so far.”

Ruth Josefina had anxiously called her husband’s assistants to check up on his wardrobe—best suit and dress shoes!—for Clinton’s hatchery tour.

“This award has great significance for me and for our daughters,” says the attorney, who recently focused her practice on the rights of Haitians in the Dominican Republic. “They are so proud of their father. They were always proud of him, but the recognition had the effect of a bomb. They all want to be like their father. Several years ago, a lot of people said he was a dreamer, but because of his hard work and dedication, he has succeeded.”

Since the banquet, Clinton has called Abe to check in and stays in frequent contact through his aides. And Abe himself has joined the Clinton Global Initiative, a consortium of more than 125 current and former heads of state, Nobel Peace Prize laureates, top business executives, foundation heads, and philanthropists.

Caribbean Harvest also enjoys support from Operation Blessing, The Social Enterprise Fund and, most recently, Partners in Health, the health care enterprise started by Paul Farmer and famously chronicled in biographer Tracy Kidder’s bestseller Mountains Beyond Mountains.

“Haiti’s complex problems require holistic solutions that generate jobs, improve the social and economic conditions of the poor, and do not harm the environment,” says Farmer, a Harvard physician. “This is exactly what Val has created at Caribbean Harvest: his business model creates good, sustainable jobs, provides critical training and education, and produces fish to help combat malnutrition and protein deficiencies.”

Before he goes to bed each night, Abe, who seems blessedly angst-proof, conducts a rigorous mental inventory. “I analyze what went well and what went wrong on that day,” he says. “If something went wrong, I try to fix it. You can always fix it; you do not have to be defeated by it. That is why Haiti was never a ‘hopeless’ place to me. Its problems can be fixed. If I leave anything to this country, I hope other people will follow me and feel inspired to fight hard for their ideas, even if everyone else thinks they are crazy.”

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