The barriers facing the youth of the world are many. And while the population of young people (aged 15 to 24 years) is expected to grow by 1.3 billion by the year 2030, in many regions this growth will only exacerbate challenges such as: high unemployment, a difficult transition from school to work as well as greater inequalities for the various groups of these young people. Given the rapid pace of this demographic’s expansion, these problems will require new and innovative solutions as well as a determined leader to ensure they are put into practice. This leader is Jean Paul Laurent.

To meet Jean Paul Laurent is to experience a duality of sorts. His tall, broad and athletic features belie his calm and measured tone, a holdover from his youth spent entirely on the island nation. And though his upbringing was fairly provincial, his entire adult life has been lived on the global stage, much of which has been through his NGO, The Unspoken Smiles Foundation, which is dedicated to promoting oral health awareness in children and female empowerment throughout the developing world.

A gifted student at Port-au-Prince’s most prestigious private school, Jean Paul nevertheless succumbed to the ennui of adolescent life, which manifested itself in acts of vandalism and, later, bullying. His merits as a student however shielded him from serious disciplinary action until one day, his luck ran out. Releasing insects inside of a packed classroom landed him in the principal’s office and earned him an immediate expulsion from the institution. Further, his myriad infractions prevented him from gaining admission to any of the other private, secular schools in Port-au-Prince. But his father, a man of some means, was able to secure his place in a prestigious private school. Jean Paul considers this to be a fortuitous event, as, in that moment, he vowed to turn his life around. The timing of this coincided with his brother opening a small studio that taught ballroom dancing, which quickly became an all-consuming hobby for the teen. Channelling his destructive impulses into dance, Jean Paul quickly began to attract attention on the island and was soon dancing professionally.

By all appearances, life for Jean Paul was turning around when fortune smiled yet again: his uncle, who is based in New Jersey, was able to secure a Green Card for Jean Paul and his family. However, the family’s initial attempt to leave in February of 2004 was thwarted by military forces loyal to President Aristid who, in the midst of the coup that would oust him, opened fire on the airport in an effort to prevent Haitians from fleeing; a last gasp of tyranny from a failed regime. Shortly after his arrival in New York City two years later, he was accepted into the dental hygiene program at NYU College of Dentistry, a vocation he would pursue throughout his young adult life. In fact, he was working in a dental office at Rockefeller Center when he learned of the devastating earthquake that struck the island in 2010. Speaking to his brother, he was troubled to learn that little progress had been made in rebuilding the nation a year later. In fact, there was a humanitarian camp down the road from his brother’s house; filled with thousands of displaced people who, as their plight began to fade from the list of international concern, little hope for relief. In this, Jean Paul found a call to action. He immediately contacted Henry Schein, a famously philanthropic dental supply company, and was provided with enough dental supplies — mainly toothbrushes and toothpaste — for 1,000 children. Shortly thereafter he landed in Port-au-Prince, the first time he returned to Haiti since he left several years before. Making his way to the camp, he began screening the children as well as administering fluoride treatments. While the kids were overjoyed at the treatment they received, Jean Paul was troubled by how poor their dental care was and how woefully ignorant they were of basic dental practices. And it was the duality of this moment that would give Unspoken Smiles its name because, as Jean Paul immediately realized, “behind the smile, there is an unspoken story to be told.” And with this epiphany came his solemn promise to the children in this camp to return to Haiti and continue what he started.
With that, he returned to New York. And while life revolved around the routine of a dedicated student, he began to realize how he could use it for the beneficence of under-served populations around the world. While it took some time to coalesce, it became official in 2014 when Jean Paul filed the articles of incorporation for Unspoken Smiles and was granted their 501(c) (3) status. Still, it would be his promise to the Haitian children that would continue to nag at him. In 2015, after receiving a $1500 seed grant from the Resolution Project, an organization that invests in young, global leaders, Jean Paul organized a case study in Jacmel, a small town in southern Haiti. And it would be this mountainous region, one bereft of any semblance of a dental clinic and home to only a single hospital, Jacmel would provide the perfect proving ground for Unspoken Smiles. Armed with a litany of supplies from the American Dental Association and Henry Schein, Jean Paul and four other volunteers arranged their ad hoc clinic in a school’s classroom where, for a week, they set to work treating the children of this underserved region. Further, they also implemented the educational portion of the program, instructing the children in proper oral hygiene techniques. And though Jean Paul was again disturbed by the lack of dental care in the children, he was impressed to see that the children responded to the curriculum and began to integrate it into their daily routine. But he knew that they needed regular follow-up care, which is how the Unspoken Smiles Fellowship was conceived. The Fellowship is a means for young women in underserved communities around the world to gain professional oral healthcare experience. Women between the ages of 17 and 35 will learn to educate, screen for common oral diseases, and perform basic procedures. With the Unspoken Smiles Fellowship, Jean Paul has created a platform to train, empower and connect fellows with other dental professionals across the world. The fellowship will give these women access to the best mobile dental technological resources, created a global network for innovation exchange, and formed public-private partnerships between corporations and governments to ensure community oral healthcare professionals are a cornerstone of the universal health coverage coalition. With the help of the Fellowship, these women will gain invaluable professional experience and will be able to contribute to their local economies in substantive ways. The effect of this is manifold, as the local population not only has access to regular care, but the women are able to find steady employment, a rare opportunity in the developing world. From this emerges the portrait of one who disputes the platitude that “you can never go home again.” Instead, this man, who arrived at JFK with a single suitcase and a dream of making a difference in the world, has confounded this cliché by using his diaspora as a springboard for something far greater.