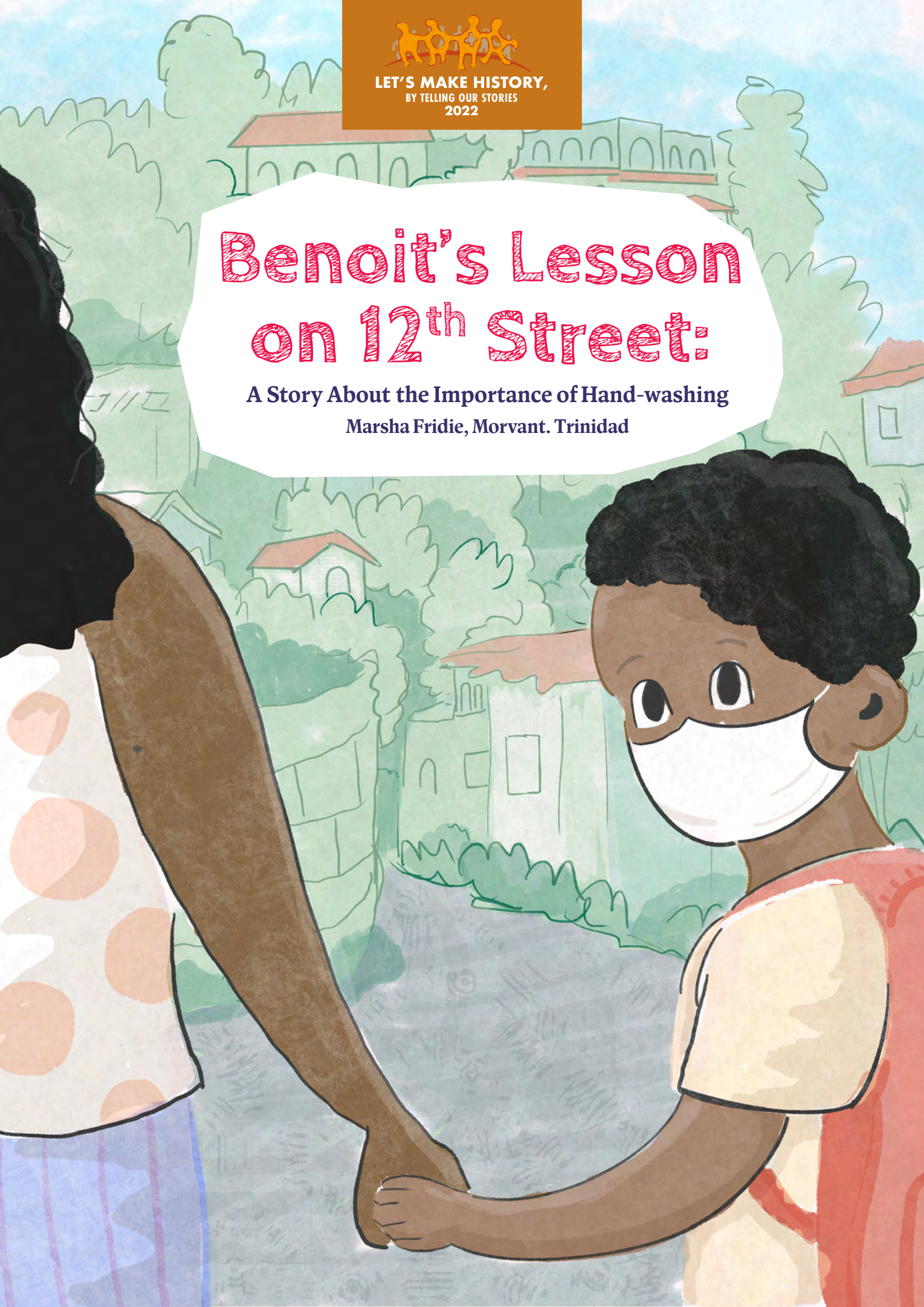




LET'S MAKE HISTORY,
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Benoit's Lesson on 12th Street:

A Story About the Importance of Hand-washing
Marsha Fridie, Morvant. Trinidad



Way down the archipelago, on the island of Trinidad, finally starting school again in person, wasn't Benoit's favorite thing to think about. His mama tried to prepare him by telling him he would meet his friends and his teachers again, but this did not help.

Everything felt very new and the worst part was that he wouldn't be at home with his mama nearly as much. She wouldn't be working from home anymore either, now that the rules were changed.

His mama tried to reassure him that everything would be okay and that they would see each other at home after school, and have just as much fun. **He was still very skeptical.**



The first day of school came all too soon, and he and his mama made the 20-minute walk from their tiny house down 12th street to his school.

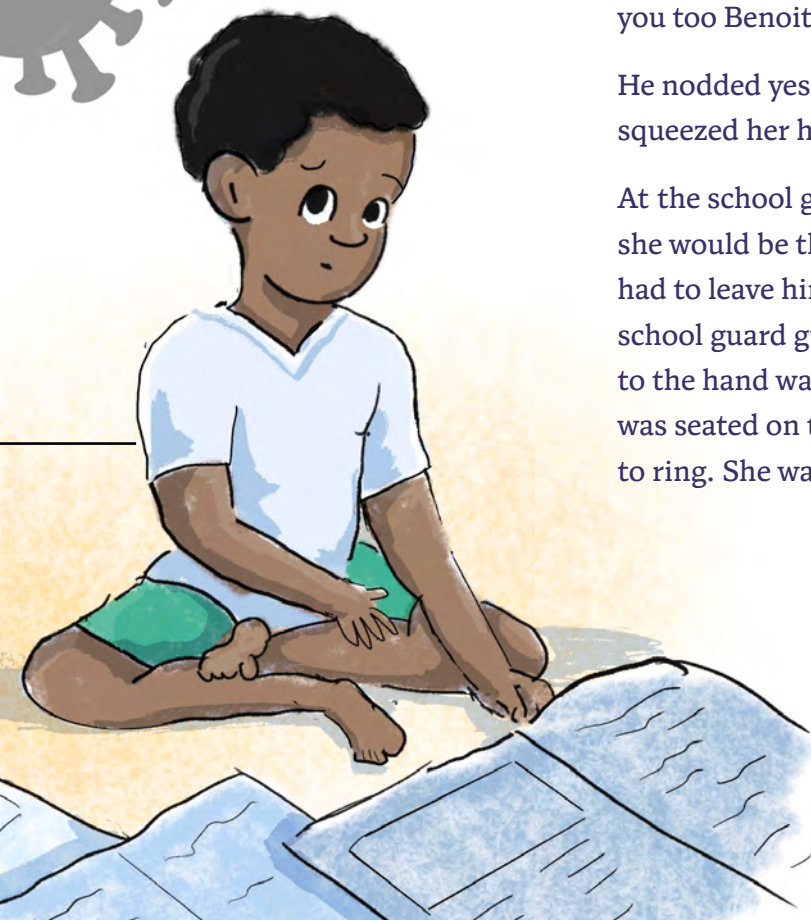
Mama talked to him all the way down.

“Remember to keep your mask on and social distance, Benoit. You are seven years old now. You’ll remember won’t you?”

He nodded yes. He would remember. “Remember I love you too Benoit”

He nodded yes again. He would remember that too. He squeezed her hand as they walked along.

At the school gate, mama gave him a hug and told him she would be there to pick him up later. For now, she had to leave him and go to work. She watched while the school guard guided him to the big thermometer, then to the hand washing station, and she watched until he was seated on the outside benches waiting for the bell to ring. She waved and hustled off to work.

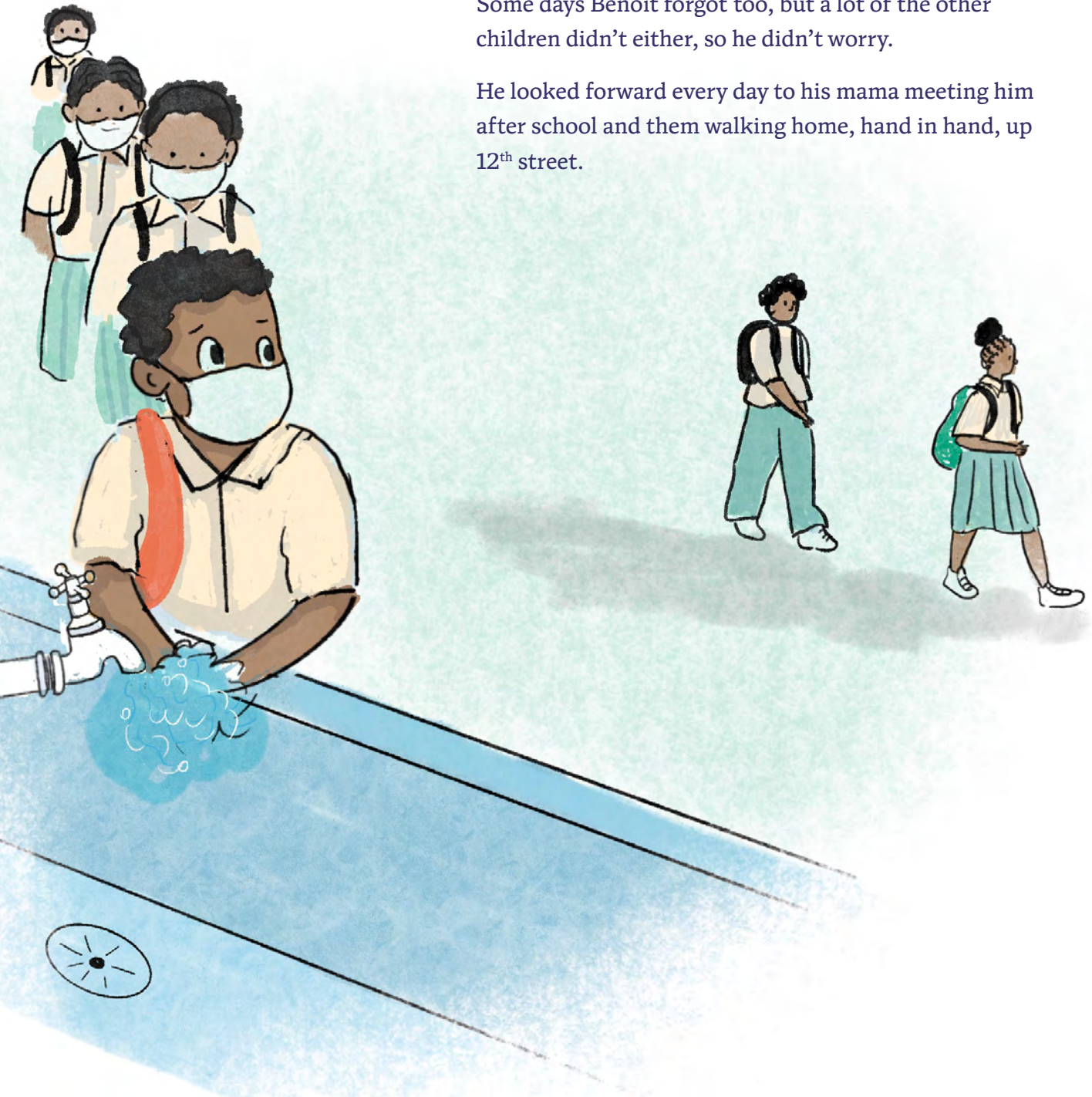


Over the next few days, they followed the same routine, but Benoit noticed that not everyone washed their hands when they came into the school. Sometimes so many children got dropped off at one time, that the guard couldn't keep track. Many of the children didn't want to wait in line at the sinks, so they just sat down.

Benoit thought to himself that if mama didn't drop him at school so early, he wouldn't have to wash his hands. A lot of the kids forgot to use the soap when washing their hands before lunch and some of them didn't wash their hands at all before collecting their boxed lunch at the food stations in class.

Some days Benoit forgot too, but a lot of the other children didn't either, so he didn't worry.

He looked forward every day to his mama meeting him after school and them walking home, hand in hand, up 12th street.



The second day of the third week of school, Benoit told his mama that he didn't feel so good. His head hurt, and mama gave him some water to drink. It helped a little and she said that he was probably dehydrated. He also felt tired, but he didn't say anything. They walked to school in silence and mama gave him worried glances all the way down 12th Street.

On that day after school, Benoit softly told his mama that he could not eat the breakfast or lunch provided by the school because his throat hurt too much. His nose had also started to feel runny.

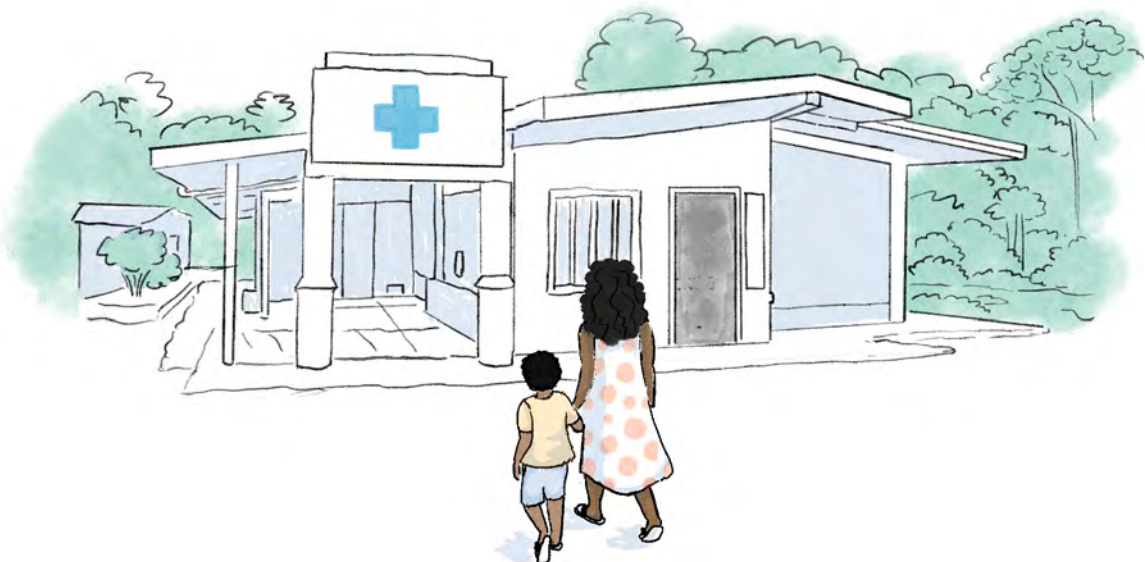
What Benoit hadn't thought to tell his mama was that about five of his school friends had stayed home from school the day before and they were not there today either.

He had not known that many students from all the classes in his school had not shown up because they were ill.

Mama felt his forehead. He had a fever, and 6 minutes into the walk home, he started to cough.

That evening, while mama was getting him ready for bed, he hugged her tightly. Mama told him that she would not take him to school the next day.

Mama herself had started to feel not so good either. The next few days felt like a blur to Benoit. Mama and Benoit went to the health center, got sick notes after they were examined, and were given medicine. Auntie Patrice left groceries on the front stoop of their house because mama was too ill to go to the store. The doctor at the health center had informed mama that this flu was showing up in so many school children and spreading like wildfire. He told mama to make sure Benoit was washing his hands at school and after school and had some alcohol-based hand sanitizer. They should both use it before they held hands if they could not wash.





Mama talked to Benoit about it as they lay in their sick bed. She asked if he washed his hands at school.

“Sometimes I forget it mama. Actually, I forget many times. Most of us do. But I remember to keep my mask on”. He looked at her eagerly as if for approval.

That’s good about the mask Benny, but we have to keep our hands clean too. From now on, make sure you wash when you get to school, before and after you eat, and before you come to meet me at the gate.

I know it seems like a lot, but we need to wash our hands so that we do not get germs or spread germs. That way, we won’t get so ill.

Benoit nodded his head yes. He did not want to feel so sick again. If washing was what it took, he would do it.

After a week off school, Benoit was ready to go back and the doctors at the health center gave them a clearance note.

Benoit made sure to wash his hands, but he also told his friends to wash their hands too. His friends realized he wouldn't be around to even play with them, if they didn't wash their hands, so they did.

It seemed as if other parents had talked to their children about it too because everyone seemed more mindful about washing their hands.

Even when Benoit met mama at the gate now, he ran out with a smile. "Mama, I washed my hands!" he would almost shout.

Then he would take hold of her hand and they would walk up 12th street, all the way home. Benoit did not get sick for the rest of the school term.

Benoit never forgot this lesson and when he was in secondary school and read about how hand hygiene reduces infection with and transmission of multidrug-resistant organisms or superbugs in health-care settings, he celebrated mama's wise advice when he was a kid.



Marsha Fridie is a Food Security and Healthy communities advocate who currently works in the field of Disaster Preparedness and Management. Her areas of specialty include Sustainable Rural Development and Food Science and Nutrition. Ms. Fridie is passionate about the promotion of health and well-being for all persons.

Illustrations by Trilce Garcia Cosvalente