

Donations sought ? St. Michael students take the lead in helping the less fortunate

By Mark Pavilons

The world ? at least a small corner of it ? will be a better place, thanks to a group of students at St. Michael Catholic Secondary School in Bolton.

The compassionate teenagers are poised to roll up their sleeves and get to work, reaching out to the disadvantaged in the Dominican Republic in January.

It's a mission of aid, but also one of self-awareness and personal growth.

The students won't be doing any sight-seeing or staying in luxurious digs. Instead, this will be a hands-on working and learning experience, one that will expand their horizons.

Chaplaincy leader Urszula Cybulko will guide the enthusiastic group of students to El Seibo, Dominican Republic. They will be assisting the Haitian community there, staying at a missionary centre run by the Daughters of Mary (les Filles de Marie). Also joining them will be students and staff from Father Michael Goetz secondary school in Mississauga.

They will work to support the Haitian community this area near Consuelo, the majority of who are sugar cane workers.

Students will be in a dormitory, eating meager meals and rolling up their sleeves to pitch in.

The situation on the island nation of Hispaniola is unique. It's a case of the poor (Dominicans) exploiting an even poorer neighbour (Haitians).

While the Dominican Republic enjoys certain economic and tourism income, Haiti remains impoverished (rated as the poorest country in the Americas). Conditions there were exacerbated by the massive 7.0 magnitude earthquake in 2010 that left more than 300,000 dead and 1.6 million homeless. The country has yet to recover from this disaster.

Many Haitians have moved to the Dominican in search of a better life, yet it's all within a developing nation, and there are limitations on Haitian immigration.

Long known for sugar production, the D.R.'s economy is plagued by unemployment, government corruption and interruptions in electricity. International migration affects the Dominican Republic as it receives and sends large flows of migrants. Haitian immigration and the integration of Dominicans of Haitian descent are major issues.

And yet, the efforts of a handful of high school students from the area will help bring smiles to the faces of strangers thousands of miles away.

Cybulko said this experience will help students understand the global community and how they can have an impact beyond Bolton. During last year's trip, students worked long days and spent time with the local population.

?It's a real eye-opener,? Cybulko observed.

That sentiment was echoed by Lexie Hesketh-Pavilons, who will be making the trek for her second time.

?I found that it changed me, making me the person I?am today,? she said. ?It keeps me grounded and reminds me of who I?am and who I'm meant to be.

?This experience has given me everything I could have asked for,? she added. ?It has helped shape me and given me wisdom and perspective.?

The 15-year-old said while we see them as ?desperate,? they are resilient and strong. They are guided by hope and their faith. They definitely showed their appreciation when student volunteers dished out food and clothing and spent time interacting with local children and teens.

The students will help put the donation bags together and then distribute them to the locals. They are asked to bring extra clothes and donations and basically leave everything behind, including their own suitcases.

After realizing that plastic shopping bags just don't cut it, a nearby grocer came to the rescue.

John Ciarallo of John's No?Frills in ?Nobleton, donated 150 of the President's Choice reusable shopping bags. These will go a long way to not only distributing the supplies, but will be put to good use by the recipients.

The students themselves are brainstorming to help raise funds to offset the costs for the trip. They will hold a fundraising night at Boston Pizza in Bolton where the help serve and earn a portion of the proceeds. It's scheduled for Nov. 28 (and make sure to tell them you are there to support the mission).

They hope to further engage the community and take responsibility for the mission to make it their own. Any donations are greatly appreciated and will make a difference to the people of El Seibo.

If you would like to donate to the cause, contact Cybulko at 905-951- 8935, ext. 29358 or urszula.cybulko@dpcdsb.org