

Hall students heading to help out in Nicaragua

By Bill Rea

Nicaragua is a poor Central American country.

It gets support from a number of humanitarian efforts, including locally, and that work is going to continue later this month.

A contingent of staff and students from Robert F. Hall Catholic Secondary School in Caledon East will be leaving next Thursday (Jan. 28) to spend about 10 days working in Nicaragua.

Michelle Coward, one of the nine students making the trip, said they will be helping out with the building of an irrigation system to help the local agricultural community.

They will be flying into the capital of Managua, then travel to a village called Jinocua, which is not far from the border with Honduras.

Michelle said this irrigation system will help with organic farming efforts, as well as combat the impacts of a drought. Teacher Glenn MacGowan said the drought has been going on about three years.

Michelle said she understands the work they will be doing will involve 'mostly digging,' although she added they haven't received too many details yet. She said they expect to find out more once they get there.

The visitors are going to be finding certain differences they will have to get used to. Student Emma Mackenzie commented one of these differences is the streets there don't have names.

'They give directions by naming landmarks,' Michelle explained.

School Chaplain Brenda Holtkamp said a group from Hall was there in 2008, adding three of the four staff going are familiar with the area.

'We've been able to show these students videos of our experiences in 2008,' she said.

'I think it's going to be kind of awkward when we get there,' Michelle commented. She said there's going to be a language barrier, although teacher Suzanne Ropitzky speaks Spanish (student Jessica Do Canto said she speaks Portuguese, so she'll be able to communicate). On the other hand, Michelle said they've been told the people there are friendly.

'I think it will be very eye-opening because it's very different than here,' Emma observed, observing how poor conditions are in Nicaragua. 'Just take the way that they live.'

'Everybody depends on each other,' Michelle added. 'They have so much less access to everything.'

She added they were told not to take phones with them. 'It would be like alien to them,' she said, adding one of them would cost about a worker's annual salary in Nicaragua.

As well, they will be going down during winter, leaving behind the cold and snow.

'That's just a plus,' Michelle said.

Although they had different ways of articulating it, the reason the students wanted to go on the trip was pretty much the same.

'I really wanted to go on the trip because I thought that it would be a fairly eye-opening trip,' student Victoria Krueger commented, adding she's hoping it will raise her perspective, 'just to really see it first-hand.'

Victoria added she's been doing some research, keeping up with the impacts of things like climate change on communities. Michelle said climate change is considered a contributing factor to ongoing drought.

'It's going to be an educational trip,' student Danielle Wadden said, adding it will offer the chance to learn about a new culture and language, as well as an eye-opener to other problems in the world. 'Overall, I just want to learn.'

'For me, it's just a way to help out and do something,' student Liam Coward commented, adding it will give him the chance to view things first-hand.

'I want to give my ability to help, instead of just giving money to a charity,' Emma explained.

'I've always been interested in social justice,' Michelle said. 'I have a passion for it. I don't want to stay in my little bubble.'

She added that despite that interest, she's never had the chance to do something tangible.

'We're working in solidarity with the people,' she said. 'It's not just a charity.'

'I want it to be an eye-opening experience, and I've made a change at least in that community,' Jessica remarked, adding she also wants the chance to communicate with the people she'll be living with.

'I just want to go because I know I'll remember it,' Kayla Godin said, adding she hopes it will get her into the habit of doing more such work as she gets older.

They will also have to get used to different dietary habits.

'Rice and beans, that's mostly our diet,' Michelle said, adding there would be fresh fruit for breakfast. There might be meat one day

in the week.

'We're just there for work, not really for luxury,' she observed.

Some of the students have studied some of the history of Nicaragua.

'They've been through a few revolutions,' Liam commented, with Michelle adding there have been some corrupt governments.

It won't be all work down there. The group from Hall will be able to see some points of interest, including a trip to a volcano. They will be staying in Managua for the first couple of days touring the city, learning about the local history. 'That's so we don't completely go into culture shock as soon as we get there,' Michelle said.

She also said they will be working with people in the village, with local residents managing the operation.

'We are the ones who just come in to do very little to help, but we're trying,' Holtkamp remarked.

The trip is being taken on under the auspices of the Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board and Casa-Puebilito.



The contingent from Robert F. Hall Catholic Secondary School due to travel to Nicaragua next week includes Chaplain Brenda Holtkamp; teacher Glenn MacGowan; students Victoria Krueger, Kayla Godin, Michelle Coward, Danielle Wadden, Jessica Do Canto, Liam Coward and Emma Mackenzie; and teachers Suzanne Ropitzky and Alex Annab.