

Life is really about helping others

by MARK PAVILONS

Nelson Mandela once said that overcoming poverty is not a task of charity, it is an act of justice.

Poverty is not natural, it's man-made and can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings.

And Martin Luther King Jr. asked: "What are you doing for others?"

We North Americans have been tasked, for decades, to helping the less fortunate - the impoverished, the downtrodden, the oppressed - around the world. In fact, Canada's Armed Forces have been known the world over as the best "peacekeepers."

Life's not about us, it's about everyone contributing to world around us.

There's something inside the human psyche that when we do what's right there's something that energize us. We need to express gratitude and help others.

When we face injustice, dilemmas or challenges, we tend to band together, combine our resources, and take up the fight. We fight for human rights, women's rights, fair trade, the environment, climate change, and of course, poverty.

Right here in Ontario, poverty exists but it's somewhat hidden. Area food banks are burdened like never before, to deliver help to those in need. In such a wealthy region, it's almost unfathomable that poverty and food insecurity exist, and that we haven't erased it by now.

People in less developed nations around the world have struggled with these things for generations. Children in poverty grow up to be adults in poverty. They don't know anything else.

And that's just sad.

We watch documentaries from the comfort of our lavishly decorated living rooms, and sigh when faced with these realities. But they're thousands of miles away - out of sight, out of mind.

Why should we donate to people half-way around the world when we have our own problems and needs? Again, look to the thoughts of famous humanitarians and you have your answer.

We are so smart, savvy and connected and yet we have trouble reaching out, fixing what needs to be fixed. Our high school students are required to do community service hours and yet limitations on what they can do stifle real, boots on the ground work.

My oldest daughter, Lexie, is our family humanitarian, and has done volunteer mission work in Kenya, Rwanda, Guatemala, and the Dominican Republic. Throughout high school, the chaplain organized annual mission trips to the Dominican Republic, providing assistance to impoverished residents and Haitian sugar cane workers, who toil, 12 hours a day in the cane fields, for less than \$1. Haiti is considered the poorest nation on earth and these people are the poorest of the poor.

In 2017, I decided to go with my son Liam to see first-hand for myself.

Nine high school students and six adults formed a team of "pilgrims" working under our host, Sister Maude Rhenuad and the Congregation Hijas de Maria. This mission involved hard work, from sun up to sun down. After a couple of days, every part of my body ached, but it was a good pain, a well-deserved wake-up call. We worked hard to make the lives of strangers a little better, more

tolerable, less empty.

We concentrated our efforts on providing food, clothing and necessities to the Haitian sugar cane workers, who are persona non grata in the Dominican. Sister Maude oversees some 55 bateys (ramshackled villages), helping upwards of 10,000 souls!

I was moved in many ways. One moment I was on the verge of tears, the next I'm laughing with children.

In one afternoon, we visited three bateys and handed out clothes to more than 200 people. The next day we delivered food care packages to another 100 sugar cane workers and their families. We spent hours standing in the back of a pickup truck, bouncing around upwards of 100 kilometres of dirt paths. On another occasion the teachers purchased groceries and a team chopped, cooked and prepared fresh, hot food, which we took to the bateys. I believe we fed some 150 people that day, which involved amazing teamwork to pull off such a potentially precarious move.

I watched some of them eat their meals. For that short time, they felt the comfort of a warm meal brought to their doorstep. Perhaps they took comfort in the fact that a group of Canadians cared enough to make the gesture. The number of young mothers with babies and toddlers in tow was astonishing. These beautiful children are growing up in rather dismal conditions, yet they are priceless.

In one batey, we were invited in to a typical dwelling. The one-room house has a dirt floor, bed and some shelves for their meager possessions.

Our work and contributions helped the on-site school and seniors' centre. We also helped fund the construction of a new well and a public washroom.

By paying it forward this mighty bunch of teens planted a seed, and set in motion a cycle of generosity and compassion for our fellow human beings.

We created a sense of renewed hope and potential, for them, and for us. It created in me a renewed sense of humanity, for which I am truly grateful.

And now, Lexie is returning with some of her former teachers, to where their humanitarian spark, their love of helping others, began.

A small group will head back, perhaps to witness the fruits of their labour, perhaps to see the tasks that still need to be done.

My daughter is conducting a yoga fundraiser this fall, to help raise money. I have started a GoFundMe page for her, in hopes of attracting donations. All proceeds go to those boots on the ground, in the cane fields, and in the classrooms. If you can, please contribute at www.gofundme.com/manage/mission-to-aid-nuns-migrant-workers

We celebrated World Humanitarian Day on August 19 and this year's theme was No Matter What.

I think that's a great mantra for all human beings, every day of our lives. Let's help one another, no matter what.