

Mission Team 2017 from schools goes above and beyond in Dominican Republic

By Mark Pavilons

Poverty is not the problem.

Helping others, here or abroad, is in our hands.

Those hands were put to very good use recently by the nine students and six adults who made up Mission Team 2017. The group, which included students from Bolton's St. Michael's Catholic Secondary School and Mississauga's Father Michael Goetz Secondary School, spent a week in the Dominican Republic, helping to feed, clothe and comfort Haitian sugar cane workers. Under the care and leadership of Sister Maude Rhenuad and the Congregation Hijias de Maria, the team distributed basic necessities such as food, clothing and medicine, spending time with the Haitians who live in deplorable conditions without clean water, electricity, education or health care.

Urszula Cybulko, chaplaincy leader at St. Mike's, called it an "exceptional group. There's a higher level here," she said referring to the students' commitment and maturity.

As one of the founders of the trip, Cybulko has had many opportunities to examine poverty.

"I'm constantly challenged by the two worlds that exist in our one global family - rich and poor; us versus them. God's greatest mystery to humanity is the poverty that we fear and the poverty that gives us the courage and freedom to go beyond ourselves. We enter this poverty through our vulnerability and our necessity to share love."

Typically working long hours for little pay, Haitians end up cutting sugar cane and housed in company villages, called bateys, close to the cane fields.

Sister Maude oversees some 55 bateys, helping upwards of 10,000 souls. To them she is truly a godsend and she's dedicated her life to improving their plight.

Cybulko likened Maude to Mother Teresa. While the two may share a certain altruism, this diminutive champion in a habit deflects praise.

If we help others, we work towards sainthood, she said.

"Working with others and sharing with them, that's all I've ever wanted to do."

She brushes off the accolades she so richly deserves.

"We have to do that work. God is waiting for (all of) us to help others."

Thanks to the team's efforts and financial support, she's been able to upgrade her facility, in El Seibo Province, which includes accommodations for visitors, a church, school, seniors' centre and adjacent medical centre. Her small compound is the focal point of the community.

In one afternoon, the team visited three bateys and handed out clothes to more than 200 people. The next day they delivered food care packages to another 100 sugar cane workers and their families. The bags contained rice, flour, sugar, beans, cooking oil and sardines. Team members added hats, shirts and work gloves. This not only provides a week's worth of food, it gives them a break and eases their financial burden.

In those two days, the team spent hours standing in the back of a pickup truck, bouncing around roughly 120 kilometres of dirt paths. Teachers who led the group purchased groceries and a team chopped, cooked and prepared fresh, hot food, which was then taken to the bateys. It's estimated they provided more than 100 hot, fresh meals that day, which involved amazing teamwork to pull off. Even the empty suitcases themselves were left behind for people to use.

There were occasions when people shouted, jostled and asked for more. With focus and cooperation, the team delivered aid with a smile, handshake and "God bless."

To open some eyes, the team was invited in to a typical dwelling. The one-room "house" has a bed and some shelves for their meager possessions and that's all.

On the group's final day there, they took a group of school children to the beach. Despite living on a tropical island, they have never seen the ocean and they were quite overwhelmed by the experience. Some were timid and afraid of the slopping waves.

The students emptied their carry on luggage and left behind their own shoes, clothes and toiletries.

While change can be slow at times, the fruits of such labours are paying off. Mission Team 2017 was able to see, first-hand, some improvements to Sister Maude's facility near La Higuera, thanks to donations.

The team purchased an expensive, commercial grade stainless steel stove that will be used for many years, preparing daily meals for the school children and seniors. The school saw the addition of a partition and the beginnings of a new library, thanks to donations. Contributions will help fund the seniors centre. Over-the-counter medications will stock the shelves of the clinic for months. The

team funded the construction of a new well. Some of the funds will be used to build a public washroom where none exist. For Michael Gallo, who teaches hospitality and tourism at St. Mike's, this was his second mission trip. He came back feeling freedom in my soul. This year I am rejuvenated of my freedom and feel God fully present in my heart. He noted everyone needs to experience the spirituality and richness of a mission trip in their lives. It allows us to really see God's work in full effect when you meet our brothers and sisters in the bateys of the Dominican Republic. Transformational is the best word to describe this experience, according to teacher Chris Fielder. Everyone involved in the mission trip, both young and old, are introduced to the idea that the poorest of our brothers and sisters often possess a richness that the wealthiest of our neighbours have never known. Grade 12 student Daniel Iaboni called his experiences unimaginable. It is like a need to be there kind of experience, so much so that words can't describe it. When I was in the DR, something inside of me changed, something I never thought could change and I would give anything to continue to go back. Grade 11 student Noah Wright said the mission is still a life-changer. Even as a second-timer, this is still life changing and shatters expectations. I recommend it to anyone who can go. All of this was made possible by the mission team and the generosity of others. St. Michael's pilgrims included Marc Anthony Corallo, Karolina Drozd, Liam Hesketh-Pavilons, Daniel Iaboni, Daniel Jerman, Victoria Verni and Noah Wright. Father Goetz's participants were Joy Abubakar and Jessica Duarte. Joining the group was veteran journalist Mark Pavilons. The teachers who led the group were Urszula Cybulko, Christopher Fielder, Michael Gallo, Lisa O'Donnell and Joann Mansfield. To get a glimpse into the team's work, watch the following YouTube video: You can see this, and other videos on YouTube: YouTube Video: [YouTube.com/watch?v=wwpP_MZGzI4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wwpP_MZGzI4);sns=em



Members of Mission Team 2017 from St. Michael's Catholic Secondary School and Mississauga's Father Michael Goetz Secondary School beat the winter chill by spending a week in the Dominican Republic doing humanitarian work.



The young members of Mission Team 2017 were hard at work gathering up sugar cane from this field.