

Container with goods heading to Dominican

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If you head into the countryside just beyond the hotels, malls and Internet cafés in Puerto Plata, Dominican Republic, you'll find poverty on a similar scale as what exists in Africa or any other Third World country.

Oakville's Judy Warrington knows this.

When she travels to the Dominican, she can, of late, be found in the northern rural area of the Latin-American country that is less than a century out of a dictatorship regime.

Warrington, who was a teacher for 35 years, said she has been visiting the Dominican for more than a decade to offer residents assistance.

Over the years, her focus has shifted from orphanages, charities and housing projects to education.

"Now, after all these years, I learned a lot. Education is the key," said the former teacher last week as she and a handful of local volunteers worked amid humid temperatures in a vacant Oakville warehouse loading a container of school supplies destined for Puerto Plata. They had volunteer help from AMJ Campbell Moving Company.

Actually, it's headed to a place called Black Waters, which Warrington describes as "a shantytown area."

The 40-ft. container is travelling by land to a port in Brooklyn, New York where it will be loaded onto a ship bound for Puerto Plata. It will be unloaded at its destination and housed at a baseball stadium nearby the port. The owner of the stadium is a friend of the cause.

Its cargo — desks donated by Sheridan College, bicycles, backpacks, school supplies, gift bags, filing cabinets and even a few blackboards — will be distributed among several schools — as well as to Haitians working in the Dominican canefields.

The bounty headed into the hands of the Haitians is that which was collected after a similar container was shipped from Oakville, full of donated items, in the wake of the earthquake in Haiti.

It is making the ride with goods collected for the Dominican school projects as the goods were donated specifically for Haiti, but difficulty in moving goods into that country has become problematic in the wake of the earthquake and ensuing local politics.



Container with goods heading to Dominican. CLOSE IT TIGHT: Emmi (left) and Jamie Soeder pack up boxes full of school supplies that are being sent to the Dominican Republic. *Eric Riehl / Oakville Beaver*

Warrington belongs to the Rotary Club of Oakville and took a lead role in the collection of donations destined to Haiti — Containers of Hope for Haiti.

Delivery, like that of the Dominican-bound container, was facilitated by a network of contacts on the receiving end — a network that, like its shipping counterpart in Oakville, has a strong Rotarian contingent.

The \$4,000 price tag for shipping the container that left this week was funded by surplus funds raised by local students who travelled with Warrington last March Break on an aid mission to the same Black Waters area.

Students from Interact (Rotary-sponsored high school clubs) at T. A. Blakelock, Iroquois Ridge High School and Milton District High School accompanied by several local teachers, businesspersons and Rotarians were among the Ontario contingent of a three-party aid mission to the Dominican last March.

Other participants hailed from Calgary and Montreal.

One of the school projects was in El Manguito. A third room was added to a two-room school, along with a children's play area, wall mural, and basketball courts for both local children and adults.

Another school makeover project tied in with a medical clinic that was supplied in an area where the health of children was deemed poor as they suffered not from malnutrition, said Warrington, but poor nutrition.

A community workshop on nutrition drew a full house of parents and children.

"It was amazing... they were so attentive, you could have heard a pin drop," said Warrington, noting the residents are thirsty for knowledge and opportunity.

The Halton students worked on that project to rebuild a mountain-top school in San Victor Ariba close to the town of Moca.

"We gutted the school," said Warrington, noting it was given a new roof, windows and doors and was then painted and decorated.

Rubber tires were also employed to build a retaining wall.

"That school was going to slide down the mountain at some point if it did not have backup," said Warrington, recalling the human chain gang of volunteers and residents working side by side, that was used to hoist materials up the mountain to the school site.

"At some points, there were 50 in a row," said Warrington, recalling the "magic" of the joint work effort.

Warrington said the school's ribbon cutting saw the son of its original builder and his mom, the school's first teacher, moved to tears.

Warrington said functional schools become a focal point for community life and are used not only for education of children, but also the community. A donation of 30 sewing machines from Linda Peel-Devitt of the Oakville Sewing Centre should go a long way in assisting someone develop some income.

Similarly, Warrington noted local student Simon Harmgardt, who collects bicycle parts and rebuilds and refurbishes bikes, has donated numerous bicycles for delivery in the Dominican.

One such bike donated earlier was pressed into use by a young male resident who used it as an income generator by operating it as a taxi and delivery system for food items made by his grandmother.

"It's not just giving them things. It's helping them help themselves," said Warrington.

Lara from The Design Girl is key to designing much of the artwork left behind in the Dominican and Warrington

said it's not just attractive.

Teachers in the aid contingent show their counterparts how to use the murals on walls and blackboards as teaching tools — dates added to the petals of a flower, alphabet letters and numbers used to assist students in reproducing and learning those letters and numbers.

A third project was also near Moca and saw the addition of a Grade 8 classroom and a basketball court in a larger Grade 1-7 school in La Ermita.

It was needed because students, when faced with difficulty in finding a school offering Grade 8 instruction, often dropped out and didn't continue to high school.

Students attend school in the numbers of 40 to 50, in either a morning or an afternoon shift.

According to Warrington, people often don't think of the Dominican Republic as being poor.

However, there is poverty outside the cities.

"There is poverty. It is no different than what you see in Africa."

"Many children are struggling, there are not enough schools and not enough resources in the schools," said Warrington, noting the country spends only two per cent of its budget on education.

"It's not enough," said Warrington, noting what little funding the schools do receive is put toward the priority of putting food in children's stomachs through food and snack programs.

"There is no chalk or paper in the classrooms," said Warrington, noting she's seen children erase writing on their papers in order to be able to use it the following day.

Uniforms are required, but are not affordable for many — a stipulation that immediately impedes some children from ever attending school.

Most schools in rural communities have no electrical power. While children closer to urban centres are aware of electronics and computers, those in more rural areas live simple lives in families where survival is the goal.

Help is gratefully accepted by those in the Dominican, and Warrington said the residents there contribute to the aid package by offering what they can to the visitors as well as helping with the project.

In fact, the recent school projects were engineered and co-ordinated by Rotaract engineers and architects who have grown up amidst Rotary assistance projects.

Now, they are helping with projects in their districts.

Students from here, while prepped in a 10-week program before they leave, still receive a priceless lesson in social issues, equality and justice. They see life beyond their experience and it allows them to gain both perspective and experience toward their future.

Warrington's own granddaughter Emmy Soeder, whose entire family is involved in Rotary, has even founded a Rotaract club in Oakville that now boasts about a dozen members, which will be hosting its inaugural fundraising soccer match on Saturday, Aug. 27 at the River Oaks Recreation Centre.

Not only is Rotary a family affair for Warrington, but a community one that spans a network of people from Oakville to the Dominican Republic and beyond — from those in the office of a company president, to the custodian to residents who hear about the cause and donate.

If a person wishes to donate, there's no real rush as the container that left this week was about a year in the

making, said Warrington.

For more information on this initiative, visit www.rotary7080.org/oakville or email judy@powertripsinc.org.

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