

Community

RHS students build school, centre

Leader amazed by what teens finished in two weeks

MIA CLARKE
KV STYLE

A group of Rothesay High School students not only raised enough money to build a three-room schoolhouse in an impoverished community in the Dominican Republic, they actually helped build the school from the ground up.

And if that wasn't enough to keep them busy on a recent two-week trip to the Caribbean Island, they also built a two-room community centre.

Trip leader Heinz Schaerer can still hardly believe the group of 20 students accomplished so much in so little time – in temperatures of 37 C to 40 C.

"I'll be honest," said Schaerer, "I was blown away by the amount of work that they did. And they never complained."

When they arrived in the Dominican Republic on June 27, each of the building sites consisted of little more than a base and some footings.

The students had to carry the sandbags that were used to make the cement by hand. The cement was then used to make the floors and the blocks that would form the walls.

The school was built halfway up a hill, so everything, including thousands of cement blocks had to be lugged up the hill by hand.

By the time the group left on July 11, the school and the community centre were finished and ready for use.

This was the third trip – and third schoolhouse – for members of RHS's Interact club, a branch of the Rotary Club for young people.

Schaerer's daughter, Alex – now a student at Queen's University – was part of the last trip and he got to see the two-room school that she helped build two years ago.

Before that school was built, local students had been using two old school buses that had been turned into makeshift classrooms. Since the school was built, the Dominican government has added an additional 25 classrooms and a basketball court.

The community centre the Rothesay students built on the most recent trip is located about 750 metres from that school. The centre is intended to provide the adults of the village a place to earn a living. One of the rooms will be used for woodworking and the other for sewing.

After the Rothesay group saw the ancient and broken-down machines the ladies were using to sew, they decided to pool their own money – largely their spending money – to purchase two brand-new sewing machines.

That was on top of the more than \$70,000 they raised over the last two years for the building material needed for the two projects.

Schaerer said he does a lot of travelling with his employer, Connors



PHOTO: SUBMITTED

Mia Flood, a Rothesay High School student, carries one of the thousands of cinder blocks hauled uphill to help build a school in the Dominican Republic.



PHOTO: SUBMITTED

A little boy in the Dominican Republic carries a bag of sand, which was used to make the cement to build the school.

Bros. But tourists often don't see the kind of abject poverty that exists outside of resorts and tourist areas.

"After this trip, I really appreciate more what we have at home in New Brunswick – running water from the tap, hot water, electricity. I've seen a lot of that poverty before, but this time, it really hit home."

Mia Flood had a similar experience. The 16-year-old had been to the Dominican Republic before, but it was on a family vacation at a tourist resort. On that trip, she said, "everything was really nice. You could flush the toilet paper down the toilet."

Mia saw a different side of the Dominican this time, where flushable toilets were a luxury and people lived in tiny houses with tin walls

and dirt floors.

She was surprised at the condition in which people lived, but even more surprised at the happy nature of the children.

"I was really surprised at how happy they were," said Mia. "If I pictured myself living like they live, I probably wouldn't be very happy, but they don't know what it's like to live a different way so that's why they're really happy with what they have."

In addition to paying for and constructing the two buildings, the Rothesay students collected donated school and medical supplies for the villages they visited.

Thanks to the generosity of WestJet, said Schaerer, the group managed to take 30 hockey bags filled with supplies at no extra cost.