

# RHS aid trip to Puerto Plata

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ROTHESAY • It was the photos of students building a school in an impoverished Dominican Republic community that galvanized Charlotte Buck in her first days at Rothesay High School. She was inspired to, one day, make that trip herself.

Four years later, that day is about to arrive.

The senior student is one of more than 40 Rothesay High students heading to the Puerto Plata region of the small Caribbean nation in March as part of a 10-day international development trip to offer supplies, hold health clinics and construct buildings, including a school.

It will be the third and largest contingent from the high school that sends a team to the country every two years. The first trip saw 12 students volunteer in 2012; the second had 18 in 2014. To date, 43 are slated to participate in the 2016 edition.

"I think seeing previous years, the photos that came back, it inspired people," said Buck, the president of the Interact Club, the student group behind the trip.

"I know when I came in Grade 9 and saw the older kids posting pictures about it, I wanted to know when I could join."

Once in Puerto Plata, the students will be mixing cement, moving cinder blocks, painting, planting gardens and helping dole out supplies and medicine. The students are collecting school supplies and sporting goods to send south.

In previous trips, the students built schools, community centres, markets and sewing centres used to empower women to sew and sell their wares.

"It's very important that they can create their own economy and help themselves," said Todd Ross, an RHS teacher who helped organize and participated in the previous two trips.

"This trip, we don't go down and hand anything out to the people. We're going to down to give them an education."

The students will also get a first-hand look into the culture, politics and extreme poverty in the area, Ross said,



From left, Interact Club president and senior student Charlotte Buck and Rothesay High School teacher Todd Ross. PHOTO: COLIN MCPHAIL/TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL

recalling the haunting image of a baby, maybe a few months old, by herself in a mud hut. Locals would come in periodically to check on her, but she was on her own, he said.

"They see that side," he said. "They'll see some very hard things."

The increased numbers, more than double the 2014 trip, will help create a greater impact on the area, he said.

But the students are going to have to earn their way.

The club is raising \$140,000 to cover travel costs and building supplies, among other items needed for the trip. The bulk of the funds are expected to be raised during three events within the span of a month.

"It becomes their trip, and that's probably the biggest part of their experience is that they did it themselves to get there," Ross said.

A yard sale and bake sale will be held in the school gym Oct. 29 from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., and on Nov. 26 the Interact Club will be selling wreaths during a Christmas market at the school.

Sandwiched in the middle of those events is the "Night of the Races" on Nov. 19 at the school. The club's major fundraiser, striving to raise \$75,000, will have guests betting on pre-recorded horse races with "funny money," said organizing committee member Bridget Oland. The event will also feature live

and silent auctions, door prizes and plenty of food.

Tickets, which are sold through the school, are set at \$25.

Oland became involved because her son is among the students making the trip in March. Her niece, however, was part of the inaugural trip in 2012 before her nephew made the voyage two years later, she said.

"We've had a chance first-hand to see the kind of impact this project had on them, so really what it means to students who get a chance to go on this kind of international development trip," Oland said.

Volunteering is the central theme in the Interact Club, an in-school Rotarian group for youth aiming to make an impact in their community and abroad. The club works in two-year cycles, with a year of local volunteering before the big trip.

"My goal is always to create compassionate students," Ross said.

The students support local Rotary events, do yard work and volunteer at churches as part of their community work and fundraising, said Buck, who has been an active volunteer in the community and in her school.

"I think it's knowing that you're making an impact in someone else's life," Buck said. "Just giving a small amount of your time can make a difference."