

CENTRAL MASS LA ROMANA MISSION REPORT 2009

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March 8-15, 2009 was perhaps our most complex, full and busy mission trip ever, partnering with Fundacion Hospital General El Buen Samaritano, and Iglesia Bautista Haitiana Misionera in La Romana, Dominican Republic. Our group of 34 ranged in age from 17 to over 70 and worked on eight distinct projects, most of them simultaneously. We worshipped in four different churches. We toured and swam and shopped and took in a musical show. We made friendships with Haitian-Dominicans and with one another. We prayed and played together. It was exhausting and wonderful. Here is a summary of our accomplishments and some reflection on what it meant to those of us who participated.

San Pedro Elementary School

On four of the days 6-8 people traveled an hour by bus to work on adding a second level of four classrooms to a school sponsored by one of the Baptist churches in the city of San Pedro. When the project is completed later this year, it will effectively double the size of the school, which serves children from kindergarten to grade 6. (Younger children come in the morning, and older grades in the afternoon, all dressed in their neat uniforms.) We completed the final block wall of the fourth new classroom, and poured several concrete columns. Other groups will now work on the roof, balcony railings and the room interiors.

The added space will allow the school to qualify for government certification.

Eight years ago, one of our high school team members, Emily Jones, came home and raised \$5,000 at her school to help with the initial construction of this school. Her younger sister, Catherine, and mother, Dr. Michele Pugnaire, were both with us on this year's trip.

Water Filter Project

Last year, this was our primary focus—this year it was an important sideline to our work. On several days small groups worked on actually making the filter units, as we did last year. Parallel with that, teams of 3-5 people went out to bateys with Sarah Abrams, the American project coordinator, to inspect working filters or install new ones. Having raised grant money last year to do this, Sarah has been working hard to refine the entire process, including the critical education component. Filters are now being "sold" for a modest fee, to ensure that the recipients have an investment in maintaining them for proper usage. The program is now on a much more solid foundation than it was a year ago.

(On a personal note, Sarah and her fiancé, Junior, will be married in La Romana in August. Then they will move to Worcester for a year, where Sarah will complete a master's program at Clark.)

Hospital Emergency Room

As part of a new seven year master plan, a much more adequate emergency room is being constructed along the side of the hospital (near the cafeteria and dialysis unit). After it is completed, two new operating rooms will be added as part of a reconfigured surgical/intensive care area. To be equipped with teleconferencing equipment, these rooms will allow for an expansion of US surgical teams at Good Sam, and help it to become an important teaching hospital for the entire southeastern part of the country.

On Thursday, 17 of us participated in the most immense concrete pour I have ever seen or heard of at the hospital. Working alongside Haitian-Dominicans, we slopped buckets of cement from the ground to the roof all day long until we finally had to quit, sore and exhausted, at 4 PM. Cement soaked gloves tore off our hands and burned our skin. (One of our young group members actually got an infection on her foot from a burn, and spent Saturday night in the hospital receiving antibiotics.) But when you start a cement pour, you can't stop until it's done. The Haitian-Dominicans who took over when we quit didn't finish until 1 AM!

So now the new emergency room has a roof and columns. Whenever it is completed, the next priority is the much needed elevator, for which we helped to build the shaft two years ago.

In addition to these projects, two people did some plumbing, one person spent all week rewiring areas of the hospital, and one person taught some sewing to girls at the nearby orphanage.

Children's Program and Medical Clinics

As we have done for a number of years now, each batey visit included several people providing crafts, coloring, and a Bible story for the children. Each child was given a plastic egg into which they put some stones. Then it was sealed with colored electricians tape, and they had their own rhythm instrument! Sometimes the adults take as much interest in these programs as the kids do.

Clinics were held at four different bateys and at one barrio school in the city. Our medical provider, nurses, and volunteers were supplemented by Dominican doctors and a dentist—and at the end of the week were joined by a nursing team from Yale. Several hundred patients were seen, with some touching and dramatic stories of how people were helped.

Our "Adoped" Batey: Canyada del Negro

For the past two years our medical teams had visited this small, rural village in the middle of nowhere. It is just north of batey Consuelito, an hour northwest of La Romana, and an hour northeast of San Pedro. After last year's visit, we made a decision as a group to adopt this batey as our special project.

All this past year we had no success in making any further contact with the village. And when we arrived this year it was not even on our list to visit. Patiently during the week we made inquiries and planned for at least some of us to visit. Then on Thursday, plans were changed so that our entire medical team and children's program could be taken to Canyada. This felt very important to many of us. The hour long bus ride through rolling cane fields brought us to this small village divided between light blue brick houses and behind that, much more primitive shacks with roofs made out of vegetation. Some had two little wires running to a single bare light bulb. Stretching beyond this scene of extreme poverty was a gorgeous panorama of bright green fields as one looked out across the valley. It is a place of contrasts.

In the middle of the batey, our school bus parked in front of the two room school, named after "Miss Annie Gumbs", a Canadian teacher. (The name of the village has nothing to do with the country. "Canyada" in Spanish is a small body of water. In colonial times the nearby pond or stream was used by the black slaves, and the river on the other side by the whites—thus the name, "Pond of the Blacks".) The village belongs to the Cristobal Colon (Christopher Columbus) Sugar Company, and the men, with their machetes, go off to work 12 hours a day – 7 days a week for this private sugar company. (They make \$4 to \$7 a day, and are unemployed half the year.) As we arrived, a row of these men sat to the side, observing us all. They had taken a break from cane cutting to be part of this major event in village life, and later crowded around the children and joined in with their activities. Some came to the clinic as well.

As we set up the clinic in the school house, people lined up to get their clinic cards, which would be their ticket of admission to see a doctor. The atmosphere was almost that of a holiday, with all the normal routines being suspended. School children sat over to the side, with their desks moved outdoors to make room. As we brought in our supplies and donations there was a calm and patient orderliness around us most of the time. Even when the children were invited to join in blowing bubbles from pipe cleaner wands, the excitement and crowding never got out of control.

Part of the reason for this orderliness is the influence of the school teacher or "professor", Senior Julio Cesar Zorrilla. Sr. Zorrilla is a remarkable and dedicated man who commands respect from the children in a kind way. He is one of two people who provide a link for this village with the outside world. Sixty five years old, he is facing mandatory retirement. Presumably the government will send a replacement teacher to the school next year. For fifteen years he has taught not only reading, writing and arithmetic, but courtesy and respect and values and history—he teaches people, not mere subject matter. After he retires, he wants to continue to help the village as a social worker, though he lives an hour away in San

Pedro. We gave him some school supplies and baseball equipment. Several group members presented him with books they brought specially for the school. One was a beautiful picture book of North America, which we all had signed. He thanked us numerous times, and in particular for our returning year after year, which he took as a sign that we truly cared for his village.

When we asked him about the needs of the school, his immediate reply was that the children needed bathrooms. The government should supply these, but who knows if they ever will. Now the children must go in the fields. We asked, if the materials were provided, would the people help to build them. He assured us he could organize this, and so we made an offer to him that we provide funding for the two outhouses. Finally, it seemed that the commitment we wanted to make last year to this village was taking on some concrete reality. The staff from Good Sam hospital said they would follow up as well, to make sure the work was done properly.

There is a second man who provides a vital link for this village to the outside world. He is Senor Mateo Anastacio, one of the health promoters in the Good Sam Hospital program. He is also a “second pastor” at a Baptist church in San Pedro, with Pastor Tanis. While most of the promoters serve a single batey (usually where they live), Mateo Anastacio serves 26 bateys in the San Pedro area—and he tries to visit them weekly! He is a short, quiet, older man, who has a heart for helping these people.

And it didn’t take long to find out what his need was—transportation. Currently he must pay for bus or taxi, or get rides from people to visit his 26 bateys. It is unclear where he gets the money to do this, but it obviously is a hardship in many ways. So we talked with him about the possibility of providing him with a motor scooter, if and when we have the funds to do it. (Later discussions determined that the right kind of scooter would cost about \$1,500.) Again, our goals began to take shape.

Scholarship Students and Health Promoters

On one evening we got to meet with and hear from two college students we have been supporting. Both are young women who grew up in one of the bateys, and would be unable to pursue their dreams and career goals without financial help.

Yvonna is the daughter of one of the cooks in our dining hall. Over these two years we have seen her gain self-confidence and maturity. This last year her father suffered a stroke and is no longer able to work. Yvonna is in the second year of her five year program to become a doctor and is getting excellent grades!

Iris is in her first year of a four year program to become a teacher.

Both of these young women spoke articulately and graciously of their appreciation for our help, and of their desire to serve their own people through their chosen careers. We will be giving them \$1,600 and \$1,400 respectively, to cover their tuition costs for the coming year.

Last year we supported four batey health promoters, who are trained to provide first aid and preventive health care, and assist with medical referrals for treatment. Due to limited funds this year, we decided to reduce that to two promoters, which had been our previous commitment. (We hope that the Naugatuck, CT church we partner with will pick up the other two, as they had before.) Annual support is \$600 for each promoter.

Financial Realities

When our final trip expenses and income are sorted out (in late March or early April), we will know where we stand in terms of accomplishing these goals. We do know that we don’t have the luxury this year of extra funds to disburse, as we have had the last couple of years. But already some group members are planning for extra fund raising efforts this spring so we can honor our commitments for the coming year.

Benefits

There are two reasons for going to all of the effort necessary to make a mission trip happen. First, there is work accomplished and the benefits to the people we serve. This falls into several categories: (1) The actual labor and services we provide while there—as detailed above, this was significant.

(2) The funds we raise and bring with us that pay for local doctors, translators and construction workers who work with us, plus the medicines and materials we buy locally to do our work. We are providing jobs for these people we work with, and their economy is struggling even more than ours.

(3) Then there is the satisfaction of working with local leadership on projects they determine are important. We do not set the agenda—they do. We support and affirm their leadership, and we have watched their competence and accomplishments grow year by year.

(4) Finally, there is the intangible benefit of the friendships we make and the hope we bring to people. This part is clearly a two way street, as we receive as much as we give.

Personal Growth and Transformation

But there is a second major reason for doing all this—sometimes overlooked but equally or maybe even more important than the work we do. Those of us who go on these trips are changed—we grow personally and spiritually. It's hard to describe what it can feel like to be part of an intergenerational group of 34 people who eat, sleep, work, pray and play together for 9 days. But something happens.

Though spiritual teachers tell us that we need to move beyond our mind or ego consciousness, and open ourselves to a more spirit-centered way of being, most of us find that hard to do in our ordinary circumstances. It's as though everything around us conspires to hold us back. But on a trip like this, we encourage participants to come with an open mind and heart—to be open to whatever happens, to notice ways in which the Spirit may be nudging them in new directions, and to follow that wherever it leads.

It takes some courage to go on a trip like this in the first place. And when you add to that a desire to serve others, the supportive environment of a group of people with similar intentions, radically different surroundings, prayer, singing, times for reflection and sharing, a schedule that keeps you a little off balance, and living focused in the moment—when you put all these things together, powerful things can happen. It's like a plant in a greenhouse with all the right conditions—growth and change come more quickly and easily.

We end our week on the last night with a time of reflection and sharing. People talk about how amazing it is to be able to get along with everyone in the group and appreciate each person's contributions. They talk about important personal lessons they have learned from experiences during the week. They talk about making decisions about the future direction of their lives, new values and insights into life, things they want to do differently. Almost without our knowing it, we have let go of the restrictions of the ego for this time, and we are surprised by how wonderful and transforming it can be!

Of course when we come home, sometimes we have the experience of quickly falling back into all of our old patterns in a disappointing way—like a rubber band snapping back into place. Or the change may be more gradual, as we lose touch with the transformative power of this time. But for many, important aspects of the experience remain with us, and we incorporate these changes into our lives—we have grown!

In a way, this kind of mission trip experience is like a microcosm of what life is meant to be like. It is a practice ground for the future, because someday humanity will learn how to live more like this all the time. It is a glimpse of what we are growing into, collectively—even if we have a long way to go to get there.

We have been blessed, because not all mission trip experiences are like this. I think the reason some of us go back to La Romana year after year is that we sense the deep value in this experience, and know we need to keep learning from it until more and more of it becomes part of our every day lives. It IS possible to live this way in the everyday world. We need it, and the world needs it. (And, of course, you don't need to go on a mission trip to practice this.) We are invited keep this vision before us, and be patient with ourselves until we get there.