

We can, and do, help change the world

Mark Pavilons



It is possible to change the world. In fact, it's being done, little by little, in every corner of the globe.

I just returned from Mission Team 2017's humanitarian adventure in La Higuera in the Dominican Republic. This work trip is an annual campaign led by St. Michael Catholic Secondary School in Bolton and Father Goetz in Mississauga.

Nine high school students and six adults formed this team of 'pilgrims' working under our host, Sister Maude Rhenuad and the Congregacion Hijos de Maria. For decades, this diminutive powerhouse has been championing the rights of her people - the Haitians who toil to eke out a meager existence in an unforgiving land.

I joined my son and was the first 'outsider' on this adventure. I wanted to witness the compelling and strangely alluring experience. I was warned this mission involved hard work, from sun up to sun down. After a couple of days, every part of my body ached, but it was a good pain, a well deserved wake-up call. We worked hard to make the lives of strangers a little better, more tolerable, less empty.

We concentrated our efforts on providing food, clothing and necessities to the Haitian sugar cane workers, who are persona non grata in the Dominican. Sister Maude oversees some 55 bateys (ramshackled villages), helping upwards of 10,000 souls! To them she is truly a godsend and she's dedicated her life to improving their plight.

Thanks to the team's effort and financial support, she's been able to upgrade her facility, which includes accommodations for visitors, a church, school, seniors' centre and clinic. Her small compound is the focal point of the community.

While I've seen and written about the human condition over the years, in this case we lived in the middle of it. You could not help but be moved in different ways. One moment you're on the verge of tears, the next your laughing with children.

I marvel at the fact life was meant to be lived simply.

Did we make a difference? You bet!



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In one afternoon, we visited three bateys (ramshackle villages) and handed out clothes to more than 200 people. The next day we delivered food care packages to another 100 sugar cane workers and their families. The bags contained rice, flour, sugar, beans, cooking oil and sardines. We also 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. 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

In those two days we spent hours standing in the back of a pickup truck, bouncing around roughly 120 kilometres of dirt paths. We were hot, sweaty and dirty, but no one complained. Never in my life would I have thought I'd be traversing the wilderness with a group of teens, helping the destitute.

On another occasion the teachers purchased groceries and a team chopped, cooked and prepared fresh, hot food, which we took to the bateys. I believe we fed some 150 people that day, which involved amazing teamwork to pull off such a potentially precarious move.

I watched some of them eat their meals. For that short time they felt the comfort of a warm meal brought to their doorstep. Perhaps they took comfort in the fact that a group of Canadians cared enough to make the gesture.

Of course, there were occasions when people shouted, jostled and asked for more. We could have doubled our efforts and it still wouldn't have been enough. But with focus and cooperation we delivered our aid with a smile, handshake and ?God bless.?

The number of young mothers with babies and toddlers in tow was astonishing. These beautiful children are growing up in rather dismal conditions, yet they are priceless.

We were welcomed and thanked. I handed out crosses and rosaries to the weathered men in their 50s and 60s, who are fueled by faith alone.

In one batey, we were invited in to a typical dwelling. The one-room ?house? has a bed and some shelves for their meager possessions. I have no idea where everyone slept or ate, but I imagine they are quite resourceful.

The President's Choice reusable grocery bags were prized for their multi-purpose practicality. The suitcases we left behind become storage containers.

On our final day there, we 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. One girl grasped my hand firmly and confidently directed me to walk with her, out a little farther. This one will go far in life!

The real changes and improvements in the community speak for themselves. A local man has made enough money from the sale of handmade bracelets (mostly to our group alone) to pay down some of his debt and open a make-shift store next to his home. We 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 our donations. Our contributions will help fund the seniors centre. Our donations of over-the-counter medications will stock the shelves of the clinic for months. We funded the construction of a new well. Some of our funds will be used to build a public washroom where none exist.

All of this was made possible by the mission team and the generosity of others. St. Michael's ?Magnificent 7? included Marc Anthony Corallo, Karolina Drozd, Liam Hesketh-Pavilons, Daniel Iaboni, Daniel Jerman, Victoria Verni and Noah Wright. Father Goetz's ?Dynamic Duo??included Joy Abubakar and Jessica Duarte. The best teachers on the planet who led the group were Chaplain Urszula Cybulko, Christopher Fielder, Michael Gallo, Lisa O'Donnell and Joann Mansfield.

The generosity of my supporters played a big part in the success of our ?pilgrimage.? I'd like to extend our deepest thanks to Carol Ann Trabert, the Parish of Lloydtown, artist Helen Lucas, residents of Carrying Place, Hard at Work in Kingscross, Wilson Markle, Jasmine Montreuil, Pat Ruffolo, John Ciarallo from John's No Frills in Nobleton, Joe Genara from Mary Lake Shrine, Holy Family Church in Bolton. There are many others who pitched in and donated clothes, school supplies, etc.

No, we did not break the cycle of poverty but maybe we detoured it a bit. By paying it forward this mighty bunch of teens planted a seed, and set in motion a cycle of generosity and compassion for our fellow human beings. You can't put a price on that!

Progress can be painfully slow. Just ask Maude Rhenuad.

What we left behind is perhaps much more durable than stainless steel, glass and mortar. We created a sense of renewed hope and potential, for them, and for us.