

How can we help curb child poverty?



Mark Pavilons]

My son and I are embarking on a mission in late January, in an effort to help the less fortunate. Many of those we will be helping are children.

We live relative luxury in this country, even if we are challenged by the free market and accompanying economic pitfalls. We complain about the price at the pumps, hydro rates and credit card bills.

If life were only that difficult for others.

The Haitian families we will visit in 2017 don't have cars, hydro or even clean water. They have come to rely on the generosity of others.

Our efforts will provide more than 300 families with the necessities ? food, personal products and clothing ? for at least a week. We hand out bags that hold roughly one week's worth of food, such as rice, flour and cornmeal. A week's worth of groceries here at home would feed them for months. We spend more on paper towels and sandwich bags than they earn in a week, toiling long days in the sugar cane fields.

When you talk about the Dominican Republic, most think about it as a vacation destination. They think about beaches, fun in the sun and tropical drinks.

For the inhabitants, who are removed from resort areas, life is not so pretty. The DR, like many tropical locales, suffers from corporate greed, government corruption and a lack of infrastructure. These, and many other factors, limit the country's progress and advancement.

Known for sugar production (watch *The Price of Sugar* on YouTube if you get a chance), unemployment, government corruption, and interruptions in electricity remain major Dominican problems. The country also has noticeable income inequality. Haitian immigration and the integration of Dominicans of Haitian descent continue to be major issues.

Our team's efforts will be concentrated on helping the Haitian community near Consuelo, the majority of whom are sugar cane workers living in bateys. A batey is a company town consisting of makeshift barracks, located close to cane fields so that groups of workers can live near the site of their labor. Conditions are what we consider deplorable.

The situation on the island nation of Hispaniola is unique. Haiti remains impoverished, rated as the poorest country in the Americas. Conditions there were exacerbated by the massive 7.0 magnitude earthquake in 2010 that left more than 300,000 dead and 1.6 million homeless. The country has yet to recover from this disaster.

My wife and I supported our daughter's desire to help and she went on this mission trip four times! Each time was slightly different and each one was an eye-opening, character building experience.

Lexie continues to give back. Just a day home from university and she hopped on a bus with her brother Liam and headed downtown, helping to feed the homeless on city streets. My son was shaken a bit when he saw a boy, roughly his age, rocking back and forth, muttering to himself ?I've lost it all. It will be over soon.?

I'm sure I would have been quite taken aback by this had I witnessed it. This is the face of homelessness and desperation. This is reality, as harsh as it is.

One in three Canadians say they want to help address child poverty.

Eighty-five per cent of Canadians believe that the holiday season is about helping those in need. According to a new Ipsos survey, Canadians are looking to spread the spirit of giving back this holiday season.

In a year of unprecedented humanitarian emergencies, unforeseen political events and rising inequality, only two in five Canadians are hopeful about the current state of the world. Amid this skepticism, more Canadians are seeking ways to make their holiday giving impactful.

Eighty-one per cent of people surveyed believe that Canadians are forgetting the true meaning of the holiday season. As a result, many Canadians are looking to contribute their time, money and efforts to global issues. And, one-third of Canadians say that if they could help address a global issue, it would be child poverty.

Canadians are concerned that the true meaning of the holidays is being lost in today's world, but they're not letting that stop them, says Deana Shaw, vice-president of direct and integrated marketing at UNICEF Canada. They're creating meaning by looking for ways to give back and help children in need. We're seeing this first-hand this year with an increase in donations by Canadians to our Survival Gifts program. Canadians are buying charitable gifts including bed nets to prevent malaria, Plumpy Nut to treat child malnutrition and education supplies for children caught in conflict.

The reality is many Dominicans and Haitians lack decent housing, school supplies, new clothes and toys. The students on this mission trip visit with local kids, a school and seniors centre. Last year, they noted the seniors had but one set of dominoes to share among them. I'm about to change that.

And local youngsters, despite living on a tropical island, have never seen the ocean! We take them on a two-hour bus ride to see the ocean and just how big the world really is. I will help them dip their toes in salt water for the very first time.

Of course, our week-long stint is but a small gesture, a brief respite from an otherwise difficult existence.

But if it results in encouraging a dozen new teenage humanitarians, and one older journalist, that's something.

As long as poverty, injustice and gross inequality persist in our world, none of us can truly rest. ??Nelson Mandela