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Caledon residents welcome human rights activists during visit to Canada

By Mark Pavilons

Several Caledon residents, and alumni of St. Michael Catholic Secondary?School, held a mini reunion of sorts.Former staff and students rolled out the welcome mat for a Dominican-based ?hero,? a powerhouse who continues to fight for human rights.Teacher Mike Gallo and his family's Campbell's Cross Farms, hosted Sister Maude Rhenau and Father Miguel Angel Gullon Perez Oct. 20, who were visiting from the Dominican Republic.Residents, including Caledon Mayor Annette Groves, stopped by to meet them and offer support.Referred to as ?pilgrims of hope,? the duo's work was summarized for those in attendance.Both fight for the rights of migrant Haitian workers, who live in poor conditions and face deportation.Several years ago, students from St. Michael Catholic Secondary?School in Bolton participated in annual mission trips to El Seibo, Dominican Republic. The group assisted native Dominicans as well as the Haitian community there, staying at a missionary centre run by Sister Maude and the Daughters of Mary (les Filles de Marie). Also joining them were students and staff from Father Michael Goetz secondary school in Mississauga.They primarily assisted the impoverished Haitian sugar cane workers and their families.Those trips struck a chord with the local volunteers and several have rekindled the mission on their own, heading back every January to continue their support.For Gallo, and many others who got to know Sister Maude personally, the connection runs deep.?You knew the minute you met her she had a special light that all of us have but just lost at times,??Gallo said.Urszula Cybulko, the former chaplain at St. Mike's, continues to organize the return mission trips and welcomed Sister Maude's visit.?Sister Maude's visit is a beautiful reminder of the strong bond between our communities ? a bond built on compassion, mutual support, and a shared commitment to serve others in Christ's name,? she said. ?We have travelled many times to the DR and enjoyed the amazing hospitality of Sr. Maude and her people. We are honored and privileged to offer her our hospitality and share a little bit of our Canadian culture. This is another opportunity to strengthen our friendship and continue to grow and learn from each other.?High school visits waned through the pandemic and have largely ended, but some keep coming and supporting Sister Maude's efforts.The steadfast aid comes from Mission Esperanza, a non-profit Canadian foundation that supports efforts to alleviate the suffering of sugar cane workers of Haitian descent working in the Dominican Republic within the areas of La Higuera, El Seibo.?We work to provide necessities such as food and health care to those in need. We also strive to empower their children by providing education and training programs to break the cycle of modern slavery,? their website states.It was founded by Linda Proulx, Serge Gagné and Angelo Paquette, who began the annual mission trips in 2003, and continue to support Maude's work.Paquette not only hosted Sister Maude during her Canadian stay, but acted as translator during her trip, and visit to Caledon.He noted that Caledon residents and supporters who attended the meet and greet made him feel like he was ?home.?During the gathering, local volunteers vowed to arrange further visits to the Dominican, in conjunction with Mission Esperanza.?We don't put our signatures on walls but in the hearts of the people,? Paquette said.Cybulko added that those who go on the mission trips ?don't build structures, we build relationships.? And they've been doing it since 2012.The efforts, support and donations are paying off.Sister Maude, through her lobbying efforts with local government, has been able to secure paid teachers for the school within her compound, a facility that has grown three-fold in the past decade. The facility includes a school and seniors' home.During the evening, the cover of an illustrated children's book was revealed. The book ? ?A Pair of Shoes? ? will be published in 2026 and proceeds will go towards Sister Maude's cause.The situation in the Dominican Republic for Haitians is grave. They are being deported en masse, but some, like Sister Maude and Father Miguel are helping them get papers to work in DR.For more on Mission Esperanza, visit https://www.missionesperanza.com/about