



COMMUNITY

Students to offer aid in Dominican Republic

Eagerly await opportunity to help rebuild villages damaged by hurricane

By Stephanie Hounsell
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

Sixteen-year-old Jessica Dorgo has had the good fortune over the years to take numerous vacations to the Caribbean and other luxury destinations.

Hello sand, sun and drinks with little umbrellas.

But Jessica, whose caring heart is evident, knows that in many of the areas not shown to tourists there's poverty and a way of life that's completely opposite to that enjoyed on nearby resorts and cruise ships.

On one recent trip, the two worlds collided when Jessica stepped off a ship only to be approached by a little boy begging for money.

"It broke my heart. It's so sad to see how they live and we have so many luxuries," she said, her emotions evident.

So when the opportunity arose through her school to travel to a Caribbean destination not to take but to give, Jessica jumped at it.

"I'm interested in seeing the other side," said the Bishop Reding student.

Jessica is one of 15 students and staff members who'll travel to the Dominican Republic from January 30 to February 7 to help build homes and/or schools, plus donate and deliver money, medical supplies, clothes, educational materials and toys.



READY TO HELP: Bishop Reding guidance counsellor Maureen Morrison (centre) and students Jenessa Hunte (left) and Jessica Dorgo show the clothing and medical supplies that have been collected for their upcoming trip.

Through the Dominican Republic Educational and Medical Support (DREAMS) program, the students will arrive in Santo Domingo, and then travel to a small village up in the mountains where they'll spend most of the week.

The students will immerse themselves in village life and work, partnering with the humanitarian organization Adesjo.

School chaplain Mary Lozowsky — who went on the trip last year — explained the villages

are still struggling to recover from the last major hurricane to hit in 2007.

"Every hurricane season is hard on them," she said.

The first night in the Dominican, the group will stay in a convent in Santo Domingo. After that, well, they're not sure yet how their accommodations will pan out.

Lozowsky explained that last year, the group stayed in a single spare classroom in a school.

Although to some students the

uncertainty might be worrisome, that's not the case for Jessica.

"It's more thrilling to me than scary," she said.

Eighteen-year-old Jenessa Hunte agreed.

"I'm flexible," she said simply.

Making this trip is something Jenessa said she has wanted to do for a long time.

"It's always been one of my life goals to go overseas and help out... and I'm okay with hard labour," she said, adding she expects it to be a life-changing opportunity.

Maureen Morrison is one of the staff members going on the trip.

The DREAMS project was started a number of years ago by her husband, Paul, and another teacher at a Hamilton school.

The last time Morrison went to the Dominican Republic was in 2000, and she said she's looking forward to returning and especially to interacting with the villagers once again.

The past few months have gone by in a flurry of preparation. The students have been creatively fundraising so they can bring supplies with them, as well as learning some Spanish and about the culture they're about to visit.

Bags of used clothes destined for the Dominican Republic line the perimeter of the school chapel — the result of a "civvies day" where students were permitted to wear their regular clothes to school if they brought a donation of used clothes.

"Dress down so others can dress up" was the catchy phrase used.

If last year's trip is any measure, students and staff alike will find this to be an eye-opening opportunity, Lozowsky said, leaving them with an increased awareness of just how lucky they are.

"They came away with a real appreciation of what they have," she said of the last group of students. "There was also a sense of how happy the people there are and yet they have so little."

Both Jenessa and Jessica said this trip is an opportunity to put their faith into action.

"It's nice to give back to people who have so much less than us," Jessica said.

Anyone interested in donating medical supplies can call Lozowsky at (905) 875-4376.

Stephanie Hounsell can be reached at sthiesse@miltoncanadianchampion.com.

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