

Bringing Hope to Modern-Day Slaves

Wallingford Missionaries Continue Work with Haitians

By: Sandra Cartenuto

When you scooped those heaping teaspoons of sugar into your coffee this morning, did you ever wonder where the sugar actually came from? Could you imagine that people are forced, lied to, and bribed to come to the Dominican Republic from Haiti in order to produce the sugar that we take for granted daily? A group of 52 adults and teens from Wallingford and surrounding towns don't have to imagine, because they witnessed this modern-day slavery firsthand this June.

Men, and oftentimes their families, are brought over from Haiti, the poorest third-world country in the Western Hemisphere, to do the back-breaking labor of harvesting sugar cane, for a company called Central Romana. They work 15-hour days in the blazing sun for a mere \$3 per ton of sugarcane they cut. A good cutter can cut one and a half to two tons per day, but it is backbreaking work and there is a very high risk of injury. Once in the Dominican Republic, the Haitians have few rights and are not permitted to leave unless they are debt free. You could imagine that it is nearly impossible to live on their meager salaries, so they acquire debt quickly. It is a vicious cycle that is very hard to escape. Central Romana provides very little to their workers besides a shanty home, so they lack education and healthcare. For the past five years a group of missionaries, organized by the First Baptist Church of Wallingford, have aided these Haitians in their struggle for health and hope for the future.

Since 1991, the construction of a desperately needed hospital in the city of La Romana has been underway, which serves both the Haitians in the city and in the remote villages where the sugarcane cutters live, called bateys, as well as Dominicans, who would otherwise have no access to healthcare, due to their lack of insurance. The hospital organizes a traveling clinic that goes out to the bateys and provides the people with their only opportunity for medical attention. The vision for this hospital came from Pastor Jean Luc Phanord, who saw a victim of a car accident die in the street after the hospital threw him out because he had no insurance. Tragically, this was not uncommon, but the Good Samaritan General Hospital now serves 50,000+ people yearly, despite their ability to pay; no one is turned away. Haitians, Dominicans, and Americans have labored together to build what is now a three-story structure. The hospital has been built solely by funding from American churches, organizations, and citizens. Due to the generous donations of time and money by groups like ours, we are succeeding in changing lives.

During our nine day trip the group divides into construction and medical teams. The majority of our team works at the hospital, which is fully functional on the first floor, but is still under construction on the second and third. Due to the lack of available machinery, the entire hospital has been built using only a single cement mixer, but thousands of hands. This year, the focus of the construction was on a pediatric center on the second floor of the hospital, which is expected to open next December.

The medical team travels sometimes close to two hours with our nurses, as well as doctors, a dentist, pharmacists, and medicine from the Good Samaritan Hospital, to the bateys. The average woman on a batey has six children, and two or three will die before the age of five; the leading cause of death is dehydration from diarrhea. This is so unfortunate and can be prevented so easily by an inexpensive parasite medicine, which we hand out to every child on the batey. Our team of doctors and nurses see every person that walks through the door, and they provide vitamins, antibiotics, family planning, as well as referrals to the Good Samaritan Hospital for operations that are often long overdue.

On a personal note, this is my sixth summer going to the Dominican Republic and people often ask me why I keep going back. My answer to them is simple.... How could I not? No, it is not easy to stare such poverty in the face, but you can do more than just stare; you can help; you can offer a hope for the future. The things we provide are so simple—a place to seek medical attention, some clothes or some shoes, but you would think we gave them the world. Their gratitude is overwhelming and it really humbles you.

Despite the sickness and despair these people face every day, you can see hope in their eyes and the love of Jesus Christ in their hearts. They smile, though they have no material wealth and are often ill, because they have such a love for the Lord, and that keeps them going from day to day. It is a blessing and very rewarding for me to be able to help those less fortunate than I, but in return, they have given me more than they will ever know. One of our group members asked the hospital administrator, who grew up on a batey himself, if the people saw us as a bunch of American tourists, as we quickly snap one precious photo after another. He quickly answered, "No. They look at you and they see Jesus". That is the greatest compliment I can ever hope to receive.

If you would like more information or would like to support this mission in any way, feel free to contact me at scartenuto@yahoo.com.

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