

MOVE on the

Story by
Mike Latona

A Caribbean trip of caring



Brooke Keeney, one of 11 youths from St. Catherine of Siena Parish to travel to the Dominican Republic, introduces a young girl to a game of Patty Cake.



St. Catherine of Siena youth-group member Jake Cornelius offers English instruction to a group of Dominican students.



Youth groups from St. Catherine's and their host parish, St. Anthony of Padua, pose for a group photo.



A group of children play outside their day-care center in the city of Monte Plata. St. Catherine's Parish supports the center with monthly donations.

Has your parish ever appealed for donations to help the poor in foreign countries? If so, perhaps you've tried to imagine what life would be like in those people's environment.

Well, the youth group at Ithaca's St. Catherine of Siena Parish went a step further — and it was a pretty big step. Eleven teens and the parish youth coordinator, Janice Regan, visited a parish and surrounding area in the Dominican Republic Feb. 20-28. The Ithaca youths stayed with host families and spent much of their time delivering

donated goods, offering instruction to young Dominican students at various schools, and taking part in church and community events.

The Dominican Republic occupies the eastern part of the Caribbean island of Hispaniola in the West Indies. The Spanish-speaking land has a population of approximately 8.13 million people, more than 90 percent of them Catholic.

According to Regan, the idea for this mission trip grew out of the relationship between St. Catherine of Siena Church and St. Anthony of Padua Parish in the Dominican city of Monte Plata. St. Catherine of Siena sends \$1,000 per month to provide meals for children who attend a day-care center in Monte Plata.

The St. Catherine's youth group brought five computers and three printers to be used by St. Anthony's Parish. In addition, the Ithaca teens delivered sporting equipment, art supplies and toys — all donated by St. Catherine's Parish — for the Dominican children.

"The key to the improvement of their society is education," Regan explained.

Part of the Ithaca teens' time was spent instructing the Dominican youths in computer technology and English. They also introduced the native children to such games as Hokey Pokey, Patty Cake, Hacky Sack and Duck, Duck, Goose.

"They couldn't understand what we were saying but when we fell down, they got the idea," said Mary Burkhauser of her efforts to teach Ring Around the Rosey.

Mary's sister, Susan, noted that living conditions in Monte Plata are humble compared to Ithaca's.

"The majority of the people had tin roofs and concrete walls. Most of the people had running water but cold showers," said Susan; 16.

Mary, 17, added that "most people in Monte Plata had real nice teeth, but you could tell that people in the country had had no dental work at all."

Though the Monte Plata area is not saddled with life-threatening poverty, Regan said that many men are forced to seek work out of the country and send the money-back home, due to the Dominican Republic's high rate of unemployment.

The Catholics in Monte Plata have only two priests for 70,000 people. Mass is held once per month, and weddings and baptisms are performed in large groupings. St. Anthony Parish is currently in the midst of rebuilding its church; the

old one was blown down by Hurricane Georges in 1998. Masses have been held in a pavilion since then.

Despite these challenges, Susan described the Dominicans as very upbeat people who are especially enthralled with dancing and baseball. In fact, several Dominican athletes have gone on to become major-league-baseball stars.

"They always talk about Sammy Sosa," Susan said, referring to the Chicago Cubs slugger.

Susan also observed that the Dominicans' Catholic faith "is a very, very key point in their life. They're very involved in their church. Everyone comes together, and everyone wants to come."

Susan said she found it refreshing to visit people who don't carp about their limited possessions. "I thought it was kind of a break from being concerned with so many things," she remarked.

Mary added that, rather than worry about applying cosmetics each day, "I just made sure I had bug spray and sunscreen."

However, Mary also acknowledged that "it was emotionally draining to be immersed in their culture 24 hours a day. They're perfectly nice people, but it was very hard by the end of the week."

She added that the experience made her appreciate all the comforts she enjoys at home.

"It gives you a new perspective, being able to go to the refrigerator in the middle of the night and get anything you want to eat. They can't do that," Mary said.

Speaking of food, the Ithaca group got fairly familiar with such Dominican staples as rice, beans, fried bananas and chicken. In fact, while preaching at weekend Masses March 4-5, youth-group members invited the parish to attend a slide show and Dominican dinner March 24. The event's menu will omit chicken, however, because it falls on a Lenten Friday.

Though they willingly ate the Dominican cuisine, the Ithaca youths also seemed to miss their fast-food paradise back home. Upon their return, some of them headed straight for a burger joint.

"Good old American grease," Regan remarked.

Susan noted that the St. Catherine's youth group now hopes to arrange for some Dominican youths to visit their parish in the summer of 2001.

"We really developed a relationship with them," Susan said. "When we left, we were crying and they were crying and we were all hugging."

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