

This time I will walk the talk on mission trip

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Writers write. We tell stories. Sometimes we witness events first-hand.

Often, we help others retell their tales of adventure, both tragic and happy. We get a story, or message across to others. In a way, we help readers live vicariously through others. If done well, that can be a really powerful thing.

I have encountered hundreds, perhaps thousands, of kind, compassionate, and generous souls over my career. I still do, on a regular basis. I've written about incredible acts of courage, charity and volunteerism. To me, these stories never get old.

As a parent, and a journalist, I've helped my kids' high school with annual volunteer mission trips to the Dominican Republic, where students help locals and the poorest of the poor - Haitian sugar cane workers.

Each year, about a dozen students from St. Michael Catholic Secondary School in Bolton participate in the annual mission trip to El Seibo, Dominican Republic. The group assists native Dominicans as well as the Haitian community there, staying at a missionary centre run by the Daughters of Mary (les Filles de Marie).

We've encouraged my oldest daughter Lexie every year, and helped round up donations for her. I commented more than once how I would love to join them.

Well, that wish has come true. The trip was in jeopardy of being cancelled this year due to a lack of students to make it viable. I added my name to the list, together with my son Liam. In effect, we managed to ensure the trip was a go. It will be the last for the compassionate school chaplain, Urszula Cybulko, who spearheaded this cause from the beginning.

I was a little apprehensive at first, worrying about work, taking time off and coming up with the money for the trip. It's unfortunate that volunteer trips are not subsidized and limited to those who can afford it. I'm not looking forward to going into debt by volunteering abroad. We will be doing some fundraising over the coming weeks and I'll be calling on my friends, supporters and fellow humans to help us out. If you'd like to help, contact me directly. Every dollar raised means more in the hands of those who desperately need it.

Lexie told me I may never get another chance to cross such an adventure off my bucket list. In this case, the student has become the teacher.

Lexie has recounted dozens of stories of handing out household necessities to the families who welcome foreign aid. There's nothing like looking someone in the eyes to get an idea where they're coming from.

There's one photo from Lexie's 2014 trip that always strikes a cord with me. It's the photo at the top of this page. At first glance, it looks like an impoverished, senior Haitian is crying about his plight. Not so. He was expressing his heart-felt joy that Lexie gave him a crucifix. The relatively inexpensive token meant the world to this man.

"God will save me," he told her.

Lexie met him again, for the last time, in 2015. He was still wearing the crucifix, even though it was badly tarnished.

"All I could think of was how such a small gift became so symbolic and made a huge difference in his life," she said.

As I look at this photo, I really do hope God saved this man. He obviously lived a hard life and deserved much better.

We will all get a chance to roll up our sleeves, hand out hundreds of bags stuffed with donations to make the lives of others a bit easier. The bags are used to hold roughly one week's worth of food, such as rice, flour and cornmeal.

I am going this January 2017, not for a paragraph on my resume, or "brownie points." I'm going for them. I'm going for me.

I have long espoused the virtues of giving back, volunteering and helping our fellow men, women and children unconditionally.

Now I will have the chance to prove it.

Our mission team members will collect items - clothes, toiletries and other necessities - and fill two suitcases each with donations. All of this, including our own personal luggage, is left behind for the betterment of those in need. The suitcases become valuable pieces for families to use for storage, cupboards, etc.

Yes, other than a small carry-on, Liam and I will return with just the clothes on our backs! And we will be better people for it.

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. It's a case of the poor (Dominicans) oppressing an even poorer neighbour (Haitians). While the Dominican Republic enjoys certain economic and tourism income, 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.

Many Haitians have moved to the Dominican in search of a better life, yet it's all within a developing nation, and there are limitations on Haitian immigration.

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.

"I learn something new every time. All of the experiences help define me," Lexie told me.

Hopefully, I will return a little more defined.