Spreading spring break joy to less fortunate

By Cara Latham
Staff Writer

Over spring break, many students relaxed, had fun or vacationed to escape all of the stress that college can bring. While other students were in places like Cancun getting a tan, a group of nine Rider students and two graduates went to Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic, not to tan, but to work.

The group of students departed on March 12 for the Hogar Escuela Armando Rosenberg, a school and orphanage that serves 3,000 of the poorest children in Santo Domingo. While there, the students helped in restoring the school by painting the rooms and painting it inside and out. They also taught English to the students and conducted various recreational activities for the children there.

Father Bruno A. Ugliano, O.S.B., director of the Catholic Campus Ministry (CCM), planned the trip and commended the nine students and two graduates who worked hard while working for charity. In addition to spending their break down there, they also raised about $7,000 before leaving.

"About $4,000 to $5,000 was used for supplies and to provide fuel, and for the generators that produce electricity," he said.

The Dominican Republic is economically experiencing hardship. The school is located in the neighborhood, or barrio, of Sabada Perdida, which is one of the poorest areas in Santo Domingo. It has been subsidized by the Orchid Foundation, a charity established by the Rotarians of Burlington County. It donates money, food, clothes and other necessities, even computers, every year to help the school run.

Ugliano said that in the south, in places like Santo Domingo, the poverty rate is so high that it is important that other people reach out to help the people in countries like this, who don’t have much.

"No matter what religious denomination you are, you are your brother’s keeper," he said.

Before leaving on the trip, the students used some of the money to purchase various recreational items to use in the activities with the children. Among the items were soccer balls, basketballs, volleyballs, nets and chess sets. They had to provide these basic supplies because the school cannot afford them.

Junior Jessica Lelli, a board member of the CCM, said that while they worked with the kids, she realized that they were very generous and loving.

"They don’t have much, but they are willing to give what they have," said Lelli.

While there, Lelli said that she and others taught and worked with children of ages ranging from three to about 16. She also said that the painting was complicated because most of it took place outside and the year-round temperatures averaged about 90 degrees with frequent rainfalls.

"The paint would dry really fast since it was so hot, so we had to mix it fast," she said. "Also, when it rained, the paint would run and we had to repaint that whole section."

However, the hard work was worth the responses, according to Lelli, who mentioned that one girl made a bracelet out of blue and black string for one of the students who went on the trip.

"[The children] were so excited that we were there," she said. "All the kids wanted was to be picked up."

Lelli said most of the kids, like the little girl, wanted to continuously play and were always smiling and communicating through physical gestures, since the native language spoken is Spanish. Although many of the Rider students who went spoke the language, others knew only some of the language from high school and couldn’t speak it perfectly. Nonetheless, the children were content and grateful to have them there, she said.

Lelli said that she was so touched during the trip that she plans to go next year again, eliminating her original plan to go on a cruise during spring break.

"People benefit from the trip; it’s give and take," she said. "I recommend it to people who really want to make a difference and have a worthwhile experience."

This isn’t the first year that Rider students traveled to Santo Domingo. Last spring break, they also went to the school to help out and interact with the children. Every October applications are available in the Emmaus House for anyone who is interested in making the trip, regardless of what religion they practice. After being interviewed, students are notified if they have been chosen to go.

Lelli said that working in the orphanage is rewarding because of the impact the work has had on the children, who rarely have more clothes other than the uniforms that the orphanage provides, and some even walk barefoot. The children even put on a special talent show for them towards the end of the trip.

However, she said that students must experience the trip for themselves to understand how powerful it is.

"It is an amazing experience," she said, "a one-of-a-kind experience."