

A LESSON LEARNED

Outside of the Classroom

Each year, members of the University of Rochester undergraduate chapter spend days in the Dominican Republic building latrines and offering other assistance. While the project allows them to help improve the lives of citizens in need, it also allows them to learn firsthand about poverty.

By Ryan Priest, WASHINGTON (SEATTLE) 2009

When the retired Rev. Ron Gaesser suggested in 2009 to the Rev. Brian Cool, **ROCHESTER 1989**, that building a church in the Dominican Republic would be a good service project, the latter man soon realized that such an undertaking would be well-suited for the undergraduates of the Rochester chapter.

Cool, the faculty advisor for the chapter and a former parishioner of Gaesser's, put the Sigs in contact with the elder man. Gaesser is now retired, and has lived as a missionary in the Dominican Republic community of Don Juan for about eight months of every year since 2003.

"Don Juan is a very uneducated and impoverished area, even relative to the rest of the Dominican Republic," says Gaesser, who estimates the average monthly household income of the area's 4,000 residents falls at around \$150. "That means that people are always scraping to get by."

At right: Justin Brennan, **ROCHESTER 2017**, works to lay the foundation of a latrine on Jan. 2, 2015, in Don Juan, Dominican Republic. Brennan and his chapter brothers helped dig seven nine-foot-deep latrines during their service trip to the area.



The country's poverty rate in rural areas was 44.7 percent in 2013, while 24.2 percent of the rural population was in extreme poverty, according to the United Nations' Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean.

Gaesser, who knew well the struggles of the residents, welcomed the Rochester Sigs' interest in volunteering in the local community. Within the year, nearly a dozen of the undergraduates had raised about \$14,000 to cover the total amount needed for their 2009 trip to the Dominican Republic. The funds included the cost of construction materials to build the church, and paid for their housing while there. In addition, they received the necessary immunizations to travel to the particular area of the Dominican Republic.

During the 12-day trip from Jan. 2 to 14, 2009, the Sigs worked 12-hour days alongside other volunteers and residents to build a church in Don Juan, which Cool says was about two-thirds complete when the brothers left. The chapter considered it such a success that it has sent a similarly sized contingent of volunteers to Don Juan every year since then. It is the fall Mark V. Anderson Character-in-Action™ Leadership Award winner for its service.

Over the years, the chapter has sent more than 30 brothers to the area to volunteer and have raised more than \$65,000 to fund their participation in it, according to John Donner, **2016**, who has made the trip.

With the church nearly completed after the initial trip, the Sigs then began to annually dig latrines that serve residents in lieu of a proper sewage system. Gaesser estimates the Sigs build about six of them each year. The Fraternity members do so without the aid of power tools and excavators, instead

Character-in-Action



Above: The Rev. Brian Cool, **ROCHESTER 1989**, and Adam Hartman, **ROCHESTER 2015**, work to pull apart an old concrete floor on Jan. 5, 2015, during the chapter's service trip to Don Juan, Dominican Republic. The concrete was repurposed for use in the construction of latrines.

relying on pickaxes and shovels. Donner estimates that in the five years that the Rochester chapter has sent members to Don Juan, its members have constructed more than 20 latrines.

Adam Hartman, **2015**, who participated in the chapter's Jan. 3 to 14, 2015, service trip, says that the work is essential, but often misunderstood.

"Most of the time, when I've told someone I know back in the United States that I was building latrines, they don't understand that it's not just about building outhouses," he says. "It's about getting these people out of conditions where they're walking barefoot through human waste in the streets."

Gaesser says that the No. 1 public health concern in the Dominican Republic is sanitation. "No. 2 is having access to a clean water supply, but those are obviously linked," he says.

In addition to digging latrines, the brothers have undertaken other projects that are no less important, such as painting houses. "That doesn't sound like much," says Cool, "but it is very important."

Gaesser elaborates as to why: "[It] is a big emotional lift to residents, because it's something that they can take pride in and [use to] feel self-worth," he says.

In addition to painting residents' homes, Sigs have helped build a community center in Don Juan. "This community never could have built that on (its) own," says Gaesser. "Before we had access to that, we were having Mass in what amounted to an overgrown shed that had collapsed at least one time before."

MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN YOUR LIFE AND THE LIVES OF OTHERS.

A person with good character shows trustworthiness, respect and fairness to others, as well as responsibility and citizenship. Those members who go out of their way to help others and those who overcome obstacles and lead with integrity are good candidates for the Mark V. Anderson Character-in-Action™ Leadership Award.

Sigma Chi has introduced the award to recognize the selfless acts of brothers. The Fraternity is known for building leaders, and its members have a reputation of acting with character to change their communities. A formal recognition of these actions by the Fraternity allows non-members to appreciate the scope of the organization.

For more information about the award criteria, visit sigmachi.org/mark-v-anderson-character-in-action-leadership-award. Email character@sigmachi.org to nominate a brother.

INVOLVING OTHERS IN SERVICE

The Rochester students' involvement in the annual service trip has now spread beyond Sigma Chi. When the school's members of Engineers Without Borders (EWB) was exploring the idea of creating its own service project, Hartman—a member of the organization as well as Sigma Chi—suggested that EWB organize a trip to Don Juan that would run parallel to the Fraternity's.

"Engineers Without Borders is a relatively new club at our university," Hartman says, "and I realized that I could help turn this trip to the DR (Dominican Republic) from a Sigma Chi project into a joint Sigma Chi and EWB project."

To that end, EWB's members raised money to install a portable water system at the local Dominican Republic school. The project is scheduled to be completed over the course of five years, after which Gaesser expects the price the school pays for water—currently about 60 cents per gallon, or \$300 per month—to plummet, thanks to eliminating the need to purchase clean water.

No matter if they are installing a complicated water purifier or digging a simple latrine, Gaesser says that it is important for college students to expose themselves to parts of the world where poverty is a fact of life.

"Having the experience of working alongside the people of the Dominican Republic is just as important as the work [the volunteers] do," he says. "It's not so much the work that they do, it's their opportunity to see the faces of the people and put a human face on poverty."