

The volunteer: ' We need 10 more people like him'

Record-Journal reporter Dan Champagne recently spent nine days in La Romana, Dominican Republic, with missionaries from this area. Here is another installment of his Dominican Journal.



Stories and photos by
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THE FIRST TIME John Powers visited La Romana, in the Dominican Republic, he immediately wanted to head back to the airport and go home. He only went because he had just married his wife, Aimée, who wanted to travel to the area as a missionary. He didn't want her to go alone.

"I wasn't big into foreign countries; sleeping in strange places wasn't for me," Powers said. "When we first arrived at the dorm in La Romana, I said, 'Please tell me we're just stopping to ask directions.'"

He spent that first trip removing debris from a garbage dump and filling in holes with cement at what would eventually become the site of The Good Samaritan Hospital.

Everyone on the trip got sick. They had no running water. They had to wash in the ocean.

"Everything was so out of my comfort zone," he said. "We went on our honeymoon in St. Thomas because it was American." John and Aimée Powers did not return to La Romana in 1991 because of the birth of their first child, Josh, now 15. It would be five years before they returned, which happened to coincide with John Powers joining the Rotary Club.

Powers brought news of the trips to Rotary, which now gives out yearly scholarships to two Wallingford high school students to make the trip, along with providing money to ship materials to La Romana.

He has traveled to the island with groups led by the Rev. William Huegel of The First Baptist Church of Wallingford each year since.



John Powers, left, of Wallingford, and Moises Sifren, administrator of The Good Samaritan Hospital in La Romana, Dominican Republic.

"It was really strange to come here and then not come for a few years," he said. "I would be driving along and I would just start crying, and this is five years after I came. It was always on my mind."

Ten years later, Powers has become the leader of the annual trips for local students and adults. He is the man with the answers, the schedule and the cell phone. He has also become a member of the hospital's board of directors.

He sends out the mass e-mails to the group about team meetings and flight information, he makes sure everyone is where they need to be once the group begins work and he makes sure there is enough cheese pizza when the cook brings out a few covered with salami.

And he does it all with an unwavering sense of positivity and a smile that is as much a part of his daily attire as his Boston Red Sox cap.

"To think God chose someone like me to do this was something I never would have thought would happen in a million years," said Powers, 41, a 1982 Sheehan High School graduate. "God has used me, a regular guy who grew up in Wallingford who

doesn't speak Spanish, to do this. If he wants this done, who am I to fight it."

"No greater joy"

"John is a man that doesn't know how to create conflict," said Moises Sifren, administrator for The Good Samaritan Hospital. "If two people have a disagreement, he will come and find a way to lead them to a resolution. He knows how to make one person lose a little bit and gain a little bit at the same time. We need 10 more people like him." Powers, the communications director of the Children's Home of Cromwell, stood in front of the group after breakfast each morning and made sure everyone knew where they needed to go and answered any questions they might have. And boy did they have questions.

"John, when can I exchange money for pesos?" "Hey John Powers, where can I get a phone card?" "John, will there be time to go to the beach today?" The answers came just as quick as the questions.

"If someone comes to me with a question, I tell them to go to John," Huegel said. "John has an abiding faith in Christ and he's just so joyous about it and he wants the same for everybody. He keeps letting people come on the trip because he just can't turn any one away. He knows they'll be impacted spiritually." Armed with only four years of high school Spanish, it's Powers' personality and hard work that endear him to the locals in La Romana. They greeted him when he came off the bus and laughed with him about his rudimentary Spanish skills.

With a group of nearly 70 people this year, the largest group Powers has ever led, he knew he could not do it on his own. He delegated responsibility to the group members and trusted them to take those responsibilities seriously. He designated members to make sure there was water in the men's and women's dorms, make sure the lunches were on the buses, and had people exchange money for the entire group so there wasn't mass chaos at the exchange window.

One of the reasons the group was so large this year is that Powers just couldn't bring himself to say no to anyone who wanted to come along.

"There's no greater joy for me than to bring people down here for the first time and open their eyes to what's going on in their world," he said. "I can't imagine not letting someone's life be changed



John Powers, of Wallingford, helps build a school in Batey La Higuera, Dominican Republic.

because I would have to wait an extra five minutes for the shower."

"He loves doing this," Huegel said. "He knows what a difference it makes. Some people do these things for the social setting and you never know where their faith lies. Some people are verbal about their faith, but you never see them helping others. John is both of them."

The only thing Powers took more seriously than his role as leader on the trip was his role as father. His 15-year old son, Josh, was making his fourth visit to La Romana while his 12-year old son, Matt, made his second. He and his wife also have a 7-year-old daughter, Rebekah.

Powers constantly looked behind him to make sure his sons were trailing as he walked down the street. When Josh got sick on the trip, Powers rearranged his work schedule so he could work at the hospital to be near his son.

"I think he felt like this was really his calling," said Josh Powers, a student at West Woods Christian Academy in Hamden. "He liked it down here and felt a connection and he just never stopped coming. I'm glad my dad included us. The first few days, I always think I want to go home, but no matter how many times I come, I always want to come back."

"One thing I've learned is that your kids are not carbon copies of you," Powers said. "My kids are a lot different from me in a lot of ways, but this is the biggest thing for them. It's our passion. Of all the things I wish my kids would take from me and my wife, it would be this."