

Wallingford resident helps with purification systems

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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TOM OPPELT felt his first missionary trip to La Romana was more of a calling than a choice. His calling will be felt in the sugar cane villages for years to come.

While many of the team members spent their days fixing a leaky roof at The Good Samaritan Hospital or tending to the sick in medical clinics, Oppelt used his expertise to help construct molds for water purification systems that will provide clean water to those in sugarcane villages.

Oppelt, a Wallingford resident and welder at Intergrated Industrial Systems in Yalesville, had gone on missionary trips to Haiti, but never to La Romana. When he heard the group was looking for a welder to help with the purification systems, he volunteered his time and talents.

“For me, it’s just a blessing to be able to touch lives in this kind of way,” Oppelt said. “God gave me this talent and now I can use it for the purpose of saving lives. I’ve always desired to find a niche where I can use my skills to serve God, and I think I found that. It’s the whole reason I’m here.” Oppelt welded together a steel form that was then filled with concrete to make the cement casting for the system. He made one steel form in the United States and had it shipped to La Romana. He made another form while on the trip.

Each form is expected to filter about 90 to 95 percent of the parasites and larvae from the water



Tom Oppelt of Wallingford works on a water filtration system in La Romana.

and each one will be able to provide water for about 40 people for several years.

The filters will be installed in various Bateys, sugarcane villages home to Haitian immigrants who work as sugarcane farmers. In many of these areas, the people must walk miles just to get unfiltered water. People use the bathroom and toss their garbage within feet of the villages’ water supply.

“I’m honored to be part of the group and that God chose to use me in this way,” Oppelt said. “You look into these kids’ eyes and see how much they need this. If we can save just one kid with the work we’re doing this week, this trip will be worth it.” Gary Copas, a Wallingford resident who worked with Oppelt to build the filters, said each filter would use 33 pounds of cement, 66 pounds of coarse stone and 66 pounds of sand to purify the water. A Plexiglas plate with varying sized holes will also filter the water.

The designs must be exact. If there is too much cement, it will seep into the water. If there is too little cement, the water will seep out.

Oppelt also had the challenge of working with “anti quated equipment” while weld ing the forms. Wires going into the welding machine were twisted onto others from the junction box. Some of the wires were severed to the point of nearly snapping and the hospi tal’s welding machine was a two-wire system, not the three wire system he uses at home.

Workers at the hospital now have designs to take over the process and are expected to make several filters each week. The filters cost around \$70 each to produce.

Danny Perez, an employee of The Good Samaritan Hospital, will be in charge of the water filtration project.

“Most of the medical prob lems these people have are be cause of the water,” said Perez. “If you take care of the water the people use, you take care of the people.”