



# **D . R . E . A . M . S .**

**Dominican Republic Education and Medical Support**

*By Mary Cipolla*

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The fruits and gifts of the Holy Spirit received in the sacrament of Confirmation are as valuable and timely as ever. Since this is a sacrament of personal commitment to develop one's personal spirituality throughout life, each young adult needs to prepare for it adequately. During the past three years, Grade 8 students from Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Guardian Angels and St. Thomas schools have participated in Confirmation retreats facilitated by St. Mary Catholic Secondary School D.R.E.A.M.S.' students from Hamilton.

The D.R.E.A.M.S. (Dominican Republic Education and Medical Support) program was started by St. Mary's students and staff six years ago. In affiliation with Scarboro Missionary priest, Fr. Lou Quinn, the program annually sends two groups of senior students to the Dominican Republic to help people in one of the world's neediest areas. This program has flourished and become immensely popular at St. Mary's with approximately 80 applicants each year competing for 36 coveted spots. D.R.E.A.M.S.' participants assist in the construction of new homes and bring much needed medical and educational supplies and warm clothing for impoverished families in the mountainous Ocoa region of the Dominican Republic.

St. Mary's graduate Ian Jeyaseelan succinctly describes the profound impact of D.R.E.A.M.S.:

*The Dominican experience is one I will always remember. Alongside the laughter of the beautiful children, the devastating cry of poverty can still be heard. One thing this country has taught me is that we do not need all of 'this' to be happy. True happiness that God intended comes simply from friendships, family, the magnificence of nature and above all, from love. The motto of St. Mary Catholic Secondary School is "Live, love and learn". We can do two of these at school: living and learning. But to truly love is to go out and show Christ's love to the world. Thank you D.R.E.A.M.S. for teaching me what really matters in life. I will remember.*

Returning from a recent experience, Grade 12 St. Mary's student, Rana Abughannam describes the life-changing impact of D.R.E.A.M.S. from her unique vantage point:

*I had the privilege to be one of the 18 students who participated in the January 2007 St. Mary's D.R.E.A.M.S. trip. All of us had our own reason for wanting to go on this trip. For me, the reason was that I have experienced what it is to live on "the other side". I was born in Bethlehem, Palestine and I lived there for most of my life. Since Palestine is going through difficult times, many volunteers helped in our community. Knowing there was someone who cared about us, someone who wanted to help us, made everyone*

*feel much better. I found out about the D.R.E.A.M.S. program, when I came to Canada in Grade 10. The idea of the program made me remember what I went through in Palestine. Therefore, when the 18 of us found out that we were lucky enough to experience this amazing adventure, our dream began to come true.*

*Throughout our journey, each of us went through a life-changing experience caused by some aspect of the trip: the level of poverty that we were introduced to, the intensity found in a child's eyes, the amount of love and gratitude we received or the unbelievable scenery surrounding us. For me, I was struck the most on one of the amazing nights while playing with a two-year-old girl. The weather got colder quickly and I tried to warm her up by holding her close to me. After just a few minutes, I looked at her face and realized that she was fast asleep in my arms. She was sleeping so peacefully, causing me to recognize how much trust she had in me. Looking at her loving face, I knew that God must be amongst us, for nothing else could be as beautiful as this moment. All of these experiences led us to develop a new sense of realization and faith.*

*On our return from the Dominican Republic, we were able to share our experiences and thoughts with the Grade 8 Confirmation students. Similar to how we prepared for our life-changing D.R.E.A.M.S.' journey, the Confirmandi are now preparing for a sacred moment in their lives, a time in which they are more aware and open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.*

Through a cooperative effort with Mary Cipolla, the principal of St. Mary Catholic Secondary School, Don Hall, the school chaplain and Bernadette Homerski, the pastoral assistant at St. Thomas the Apostle Church in Waterdown, strong parish, school and family faith partnerships have been forged and nourished with the Waterdown feeder schools and St. Mary Catholic Secondary School. The parish is the hub of the network. The inclusion of graduates from the parish schools in the program activities helps the parish community to see the ongoing faith development of our young people at a time when our youth are often seen as uninterested in the on-going life of the Church and the parish community.

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