

Go In Peace To Love and To Serve The Lord

By **Wendy Hooker**, Vice-principal
Blessed Mother Teresa Catholic SS, Toronto CDSB



It is early July and I have just cleared my desk and e-mails. We have wished our school community a safe summer, said farewell to our graduates and acknowledged the remarkable contributions of our retiring colleagues; time to relax and reflect. Personally, I am very thankful for all the compassionate people that I have met in my profession as a Catholic teacher. Despite the challenges, our students and my colleagues have attempted to fulfil our core mission to *go in peace to love and to serve the Lord*.

Our Catholic schools consistently respond to local needs or global disasters with innovative and entrepreneurial strategies of raising awareness and funds. Community service has always been integrated into our Catholic curriculum fostering character development as well as implemented for secondary school graduation requirements. Consider the collaborative Thinkfasts, Family Christmas Baskets and Walks Against Violence often organized by our religion and chaplaincy staff and assisted by our student leaders.

Our students are awesome. At Toronto's St. Joseph Morrow Park C.S.S. (SJMP) two Grade 10 students, Catherine and Vanessa, approached me regarding their proposal, *Adopt a Grandparent*. These ladies recognised that the local seniors in Gibson House, a retirement residence, possessed remarkable experience and advice to be shared with our youth. They rationalized that the seniors might appreciate some regularly scheduled visitors and collaborative activities with our students. The girls scheduled a meeting with the manager then independently advertised and selected 40 students whom they divided into two teams of twenty, who would visit the seniors on alternate Wednesday afternoons after school. The pilot lasted one semester concluding with a celebration and evaluation session. It was a resounding success for all participants.

Another Grade 10 SJMP student, Pamela, browsed the *Habitat for Humanity* website and proposed organizing a group to help build

homes for folks who normally would never be capable of earning sufficient funds to purchase their own home. Once again this student and her friends organized and advertised the adventure. They raised almost \$1000 and spent their March break performing whatever tasks were needed at the Malvern site for *Habitat for Humanity*. A few staff and parents joined the group but it was the girls who initiated and completed the enterprise.

Michael was a potential graduate at Blessed Mother Teresa C.S.S. Every lunch period he volunteered his time to sell soft drinks for a loonie to our community in the atrium. A retired teacher initiated the project in the fall but Michael fulfilled the pilot throughout the year so that a generous donation to the *Nelson Mandela Fund for Children* was accomplished.

Our staff equally amazes me. They complete a very challenging day of teaching or supporting our students in their diverse roles and then spend hours before classes, during lunch or after school coaching, tutoring or mentoring our kids on a daily basis. Some staff members, including retirees, even donate their time and skills on weekends and holidays. Many have their own families, friends and community commitments, yet these people model the role of service for others, expecting no recognition for themselves.

Steve De Quintal, a Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB) graduate and former kindergarten teacher, joined our staff at St. Mary C.S.S. Initially he had a phone number that you called to obtain a list of service events that he initiated or supported and then invited others to join. With e-mail, Steve expanded his network of contacts and volunteer calendar. Eventually he created a website for volunteer activities in Toronto's inner city area. This passionate teacher piloted March break trips of service to missions in Cuba and Mexico. Twenty-one students and teachers travelled to Tijuana, Mexico in March 2004 to Casa Del Migrante working in the various missions throughout the city. Every student earned their own costs for the trip derived from service events that Steve helped plan and coordinate each Tuesday lunch period.

If there was a celebration with excess refreshments, Steve encouraged us to deliver them to nearby shelters including food from semi-formals and proms. The last Friday before March Break, our community prepared donation boxes for the Food Bank. At Christmas the siblings of our students joined our multicultural Christmas celebrations and then our students played Santa to the children in the neighbouring elementary schools. Students in Steve's Peer Helper Leadership classes, which were usually scheduled last period, went to specific elementary schools to offer peer tutoring and peer coaching for various sports, effectively translating for the many new Canadian students. When I left St. Mary's, many staff offered field trips of service with their own classes both during and beyond school timelines reflecting Steve's example.

Tony De Sousa was a principal of insight at St. Mary. He encouraged and celebrated student volunteer service, as most opportunities for enriching our students were usually met with approval and funding. Our students attended the TCDSB three-day Confirmation Leadership retreats, then planned and organized similar events for our neighbouring Grade 8 students. While the younger students

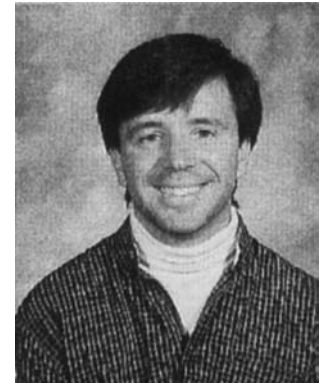


Opposite page: Volunteers at Emorijoy school site, Kenya making the foundations for another classroom building, August 2006.

Left: Greg Rogers animating discussion at the November 2007BMT retreat.



Tony De Sousa, former Principal of St. Mary's C.S.S., Toronto



Steve De Quintal, exemplary social activist at St. Mary's C.S.S.

were trained by the secondary student leaders, the elementary teachers exchanged strategies and resources with secondary staff. Our secondary student leaders refined their faith and genuinely assisted the elementary students in their faith development and transition to secondary education. Our students ran elementary athletic workshops, assisted with elementary tournaments and facilitated in teaching reading programs to the elementary students. Note that almost half of our secondary students had been in Canada for less than five years and almost a third of the students were identified with learning exceptionalities. Our resource students were involved in most events and we celebrated success together whether it was awareness for cancer research with the Terry Fox Run or Award and Graduation celebrations. Everyone was embraced and commended.

My final acknowledgement is of Greg Rogers. His official responsibility is Student Leadership and Staff Development for the TCDSB. Greg envisions opportunities in the local or global community and proposes initiatives with students, staffs and community partners. Greg works with the religion resource staff and facilitates the Secondary Student Confirmation retreats often assisting with funding when schools lack sufficient funds to send student leaders. Greg initiates or assists tremendous service learning opportunities not only for youth specifically, but also for adults including Empowering Student Partners (ESP), Catholic Student Leadership Impact Leaders (CSLIT), Student Trustee events and the When Faith Meets Pedagogy conference. As an associate of Camp Olympia near Huntsville,



March Break 2004 Volunteers in Tijuana, Mexico Day Care resting with the children. The volunteers were painting murals in the centre.

Greg operates a three-week July leadership camp where students develop their personal skills and service awareness while earning a credit towards their graduation diploma. Greg created the Labour Day weekend leadership camp, now included in the TCDSB Summer Institutes for staff and students and two weekend leadership camps in May whereby dozens of TCDSB student leaders meet, dialogue and respond to diverse challenges. Many of these students return to Camp Olympia as summer counsellors for young campers and some become involved in global service.

In this respect, Bob Lato and Greg Rogers run *Adventure Learning Experiences* whereby adults and youth travel to India and Africa. Together these gents have refined a program whereby the participants meet throughout the year at the TCDSB board office preparing for a service venture. During the May Victoria holiday weekend the group travels north to the Smart's farm where they work collaboratively on physically challenging tasks. The group becomes community in preparation for their almost month-long trip to work as volunteers overseas. I have been

As good Samaritans we can all attempt to serve one another and invite others to be involved.



Group breaking the ground to prepare a playground for the Sisters of Charity orphanage in Tijuana.

extremely fortunate to have joined the groups on the Tanzania trip of August 2004 and the Kenya trip of August 2006. These service experiences irrevocably alter and transform you. It occurs progressively, initially from learning as a group and attempting to develop strategies for fundraising for your group's participation, then from your unique individual and group experiential interaction with the local communities and finally from your presentations to share your experience with others at home.

Having sketched some of my observations and experiences in my school communities, I believe that each individual has authentic service leadership modelled in all our communities and that each individual responds in their most genuine manner. You can certainly identify your own students and staff that you consistently witness serving others without any expectation of recognition. As good Samaritans we can all attempt to serve one another and invite others to be involved. However, it is in our Catholic school communities where we profess to be Christ-centred and child-focused that we may resonate in our commitment to *go in peace to love and to serve the Lord.*

Contact Wendy Hooker at wendy.hooker@tcdsb.org for further information.