

Dominican Republic

Friends of the Orphans Canada & Re/Nourish Trip

January 10 – 19, 2011

by David Pfortmueller

“That was tough!” exclaimed Terry. He had just emerged from an Irrigation Industry Association of BC exam, a certification exam, notorious for its low pass rate. The exam writer, famed irrigation industry guru Ted VanDer Guilik would explain many times to students like us that the exam, while tough to pass, would be a badge of honor once achieved. It was here that Terry and I met for the first time almost 20 years (and 20 pounds) ago. We would continue to meet annually at industry events, and training sessions. He was a supplier rep at that time, and later became the Canadian sales rep for one of the larger irrigation manufacturers.

Fast forward 18 years, and Terry’s name came up at an IIABC meeting. I was president of the Association at the time, demanding but rewarding work to be sure. Terry had emailed the Association looking for support from other industry members – he was going to the Dominican Republic to help install a soccer field and irrigation system at an orphanage. The Association donated, as did its members, including myself. We were promised an article for our newsletter (content is always so hard get!), and we weren’t disappointed. It was an incredible success for Terry, and the orphanage. Just after the article was shared through our industry newsletter, I read it and was touched. The first moment I had, I emailed Terry and told him of my interest in going in the future. And then I called him. And then I mailed him, and then I accosted him at every industry event we went to. It wasn’t an easy process to be “part of the team”.

October of 2010 I received a phone call from Terry, “Dave, you’re going to the DR in January! I don’t know the exact dates, but that info will be coming! Pack your bags, tell your wife, and start raising money!”

And so started the trip that would remain indelible in my memory for a long time... Included on the trip were myself, Terry and Paolo. Paolo runs a large landscape-irrigation company in Kamloops, and is also a past president of the IIABC. Our “BC” contingent would be a small part of the whole group from across Canada, the bulk of which was made up of Nutrilawn Employees from eastern Canada, and there was a token Rotarian, Jerry, who would be our liaison helping with one of the Rotarian initiatives.

It was -8 in Toronto when we boarded the plane. I didn’t know it at the time, but our physical and mental aptitudes would be put to the test over the following week...

Day 1

Hard to put into words the crazy things I have seen today. Here’s a juxtaposition for you: leaving the hotel in the AM, passing by beautiful new homes, guarded by a guy with a shotgun, to passing through "villages" of tiny, tiny homes with kids, families, and parents, the size of a single

car garage, all tacked together. I hate to get caught up in the guilty pictures we've all see on TV of these types of places, but I saw them with my own eyes today...surreal.

On a more positive note, we had a very fruitful (and hot, and long) first day! After an orientation at the orphanage, we were set free to start our tasks of the day (the week, really). The sister wanted the front of the visitors housing center landscaped, and also some fine-tuning of the



soccer field that the group had installed over the previous two years. My god was it hot! Dry, bone dry, soil, full sun, and picks and shovels flew through the air like rototillers. If it didn't run through your mind "WTF am I doing here?" midway thru the day, you're a better man than I.

I went through 1 1/2 gallons of water today, with no need to pee. And, of course, I have already been thoroughly freaked out by everyone at this point

about NOT drinking the water from the taps, and to "kick" everything we pick up first - to ward off the ants, spiders and tarantulas. Lunch was interesting, and the first time we had any interaction with the kids.... we were paired up and sent to a "house" each house holds 15-20 similar sex, similar age kids, with one "aunt" to watch over them. The aunts work 4 days on, 3 days off, 24 hours. There are 250 kids on site. All the kids come in from school

(everything is on the same compound, all fenced in - school, medical clinic, church, water purification buildings, kitchen, visitors building, etc...). The kids were extremely well behaved. After some butchered Spanish, Paolo and I figured out where we were to site, and what to eat. This was the



QUIETEST meal I have ever eaten - eighteen 6-9 year-olds in the room, and not a peep during the meal - the plates were HUGE (I was uncertain I could finish) - when I asked why everyone was so well behaved later, I was told it is customary for meal times to be quite times. VERY unusual for me! During the tour, we were shown the rooms within the houses - they're small, very (obviously) communal but clean and tidy (and organized!).

Once the afternoon arrived, we ran out of things to do (we were waiting on soil to be delivered that was promised, but apparently "approximate" days of deliver are quite common). SO we all piled into a tiny bus (11 of us- the volunteer coordinator came too - a very nice young lady from Olympia, Washington) and drove to a nunnery about 20 minutes away. The group had planted about 100 fruit trees last year at the site - some had been stolen, and a fence broken, so we planned a repair and replacement for tomorrow...

Then, off with yet another passenger in the van - the nun - now we're up to 12 in this van and



the suspension was now non-existent. We traveled 15 minutes by blacktop, and, after getting directions, and a "motorcycle escort" from a guy on the side of the road that (I

guess) had nothing better to do, another 30 minutes via bump-laden dirt road thru the sugar canes to a tiny village. The Rotarians are building a community garden in the middle of the community, and want us to install irrigation & help with the construction. We were there to scope it out, and plan the attack for later in the week. But the only ones that were being attacked were us! - kids everywhere (amidst the cows, wild dogs, goats, and chickens). Absolutely incredible! The kids were tons of fun... but... you can't help but take an enormous gut check where you're in a place like this... a huge one. After an hour of figuring, we piled back in the van, with plans to return for the irrigation installation later in the week, and plans to host a BBQ for the village's 500 or so folks later that day - that should be interesting... I'll be thinking of the kids I saw today, living in completely different conditions than I will be once my head hits the pillow in the hotel.



DR Day 2

Well, today was a strange but productive one... it started off with an incredibly persistent man on the side of the highway - a one legged man that hopped his way from place to place - very alarming to say the least, but it worked for him.

Our group split up today, Paolo and I staying at the orphanage, and the rest going to the nunnery. They planted fruit trees, and repaired the irrigation, and we had the distinctive pleasure to start construction of a footing for a new concrete pad in the "slaughter" area - about 12' x 35' - and it was another scorcher. The orphanage has a large number of farm animals on one part of the site, which, of course, they use for food. Problem no 1 was a mild case of dysentery that reared (sorry, I couldn't resist the pun!) its ugly head in the AM...I was torn as to whether to go to the clinic on site and ask for some pills from the very attractive young doctor from Austria we met the day before. After some thought on exactly how much I would embarrass myself using the various hand gestures to bridge our language barriers and ultimately explain my predicament, I resolved to make frequent trips instead to the head...

In between bathroom breaks, Paolo and I worked feverishly to solve problems that would, in our world, not be problems. We had no lumber, except a choice 2 x 10 that was clearly being saved for a more noble cause. So, we found some ripped pieces that were generally the same size, give or take, and proceeded to scab them together, creating a "rigid" piece of formwork 35' long that more closely resembled inedible spaghetti. Stakes were installed, and everything was going well - we had to alter the grade, and, much to our surprise, destroy the homes for 2 tarantulas, 2 centipede (the size of a hot dog wiener!), one venomous black snake, and a whole pile of ants (that loved the taste of our skin apparently....have you ever seen those poor buggers on the TV show *Survivor*, constantly scratching their skin - I now know why...).



Lunch broke up the day - this time we went to a boy's house - they were all about 8-12 years old. I now knew the routine, and waited to be directed to my seat...everything was going great until the boy whose normal home was my seat came in - he wasn't happy - I'm pretty sure I was cussed out in Spanish. A firm slap from the aunt of the house quieted him up (ouch! - how do you say "uncomfortable" in Spanish?) I was certain to behave from now on - the Aunt looked like she had a perfect follow-through; no doubt she wouldn't hesitate to try it out on a big redhead from Canada.

Again, the food portions were HUGE!!! I've found out that at the orphanage, breakfast and dinner are really more like snacks. I only got half into my mouth, and couldn't fit any more - the very small, and skinny, and the FASTEST eater at the table was beside me, and he kindly took my leftovers - at first he paused with my plate in his hand as though he was going to share with his

buddies, but after *seconds* of careful thought, he decided to slide everything I had given him onto his plate....

Back to work, we came to the slaughter shed, about 100 meters from the visitors center we had prepped the day before, and notice that 2 huge loads of soil had been delivered during lunch - in the wrong place!! Of all the luck - we were charged with the responsibility of "guiding" the truck into the most efficient location to dump to minimize our work the following day...oops....the other guys aren't going to take this well..!

We were now "Assisted" by a volunteer from Chicago, and two of the students. He took great pleasure in sharing with us a few tips from his many years on site: 1. If you're working, everyone will come by with an idea of what should be done, and suggest improvements - his tip was to just ignore them and keep on with your plan. 2) Whomever isn't working can't boss around who is working.he proceeded to violate both rules... gotta laugh!

Everything was now prepped for concrete - formwork and base. All tolled, net of lunch and trips to the restroom, 5 hours for 2 guys and a couple of helpers for the afternoon. Fulfilling, yes - efficient by our standards, no; but we're come to change our expectations markedly...!

We were picked up much earlier today - about 3 pm, and taken through two police roadblocks to the nunnery. Hard to imagine what they were stopping folks for that warranted 3 guys at each stop with loaded shotguns resting on their shoulders... the group at the nunnery had completed all they could today - we're back to do the rest of the work tomorrow.

As the red soot from the roadbase & coral we used for the concrete base washed down my leg and into the drain of the shower, I was happy to be done for the day!

DR Day 3

Last night, just before hitting the hay, we had the first chance to confirm that we were, in fact, somewhat near the ocean. Time permitted us to stroll to the beach and check it out. Briefly. So, we've seen many scary things in the DR – tarantulas, venomous snakes, ill-tempered centipedes...but the scariest of all we witnessed last night, just before sundown – European men in spedos! Ouch....

After the killer long day yesterday, my body was happy to ingest a round of Tylenol and Nyquil. The long night's sleep my body was yearning for was finally here!

So, bright and early in the AM, I awoke, as did my billet, Terry, WITHOUT the help of the alarm clock. We were late day 1 (time on the clock was set to the wrong hour), early by one hour day 2 (alarm was set to the wrong time), and now, our bodies were getting us up at the perfect time, sans alarm!

Off we went for our now normal trek to the orphanage, with a minor detour in the AM – to the hardware store, and the “jumbo” mart. The hardware store owner was a fabulous guy named Jose. He helped us with necessary items for today – fence posts, cement powder,

concrete finishing tools, shovels, wire, and more gloves! He was happy to deliver many of the items, and even offered to deliver a ton of plants we had ordered. He would prove to be even more help later in the day. The Jumbo mart was the DR's version of Walmart.

Myself and two other complete Spanish-incompetents were tasked with simply ordering lunch for today, and 800 buns, hot dogs, and all the fixin's for Sunday's BBQ in the village. After many gestures, and a few incorrect usages of the iphone's translated English words, we were out!



As we passed down the same pothole-laden road to the orphanage, I see the same old man digging in what I learned later was a dump. Pick in hand, we've seen him at the end of every last day along the side of the highway with a sac of something from his day of digging – I can only imagine what it is he's unearthed. He's found himself a way to support his family.

We split up again into two groups. My group was dropped to the nunnery. Originally built by 6 Brazilian Nuns, the complex was not in the business of

“spreading the gospel”, but instead offered temporary housing and counseling (including lawyer services) for Haitians that had entered the DR without papers.

Over the course of 5 hours we planted some 60 odd trees: avocado, lime, and mango trees. The drip irrigation was in need of repair, and we also needed to add more irrigation for the new trees. Two Haitian immigrants had been helping us all day, and I was a combination of glad and embarrassed to communicate with them using my broken French – I guess helping my kids with their French homework was helping me too. We broke for lunch just in time – one of the Haitians had forewarned of rain, and here it was. Wow! We should have been building an arc!



Lunch ended, and the rest of the group returned from their tasks. They planted two HUGE “bread” trees that Jose’s truck had delivered, along with the fencing material, to the village. Shortly after the trees were planted, the “mayor” of the village speedily wrapped the trunks in burlap



and plastic. The cows, pigs, and goats, that roam free everywhere will eat them before the morning it was explained. The solution, apparently, was to erect a fence, outside of the fence, to protect the trees. Read: more work....! Many fences in the DR are “living” fences. Large trees are planted along the

property line, as they grow, straight limbs are cut off and replanted along the property line. Barbed wire is weaved in between all, and the result is a living fence, that gets stronger, and the posts never rot! So, more materials and work were needed for later in the week...

The whole group took a trip back into town, we grabbed Jose, and headed to the “nursery”. A tiny patch of field nestled between a bunch of buildings, with only access through a doorway-width alley of sorts – no sign, no address. Its almost like he never wanted anyone to know he was there. Negotiation and an order for more avocado, mango, and lemon trees ensued, including a fabulous sales pitch for an orange tree that produced “peelable” sweet oranges. Sounds like a crazy benefit, but oranges here are more lemon-colours, and difficult to peel – so we bought them too!

A quick trip back to the orphanage to pick up Sue – she was left there for the day to do some creative things with the teachers for the kids. We were given the keys to another truck for our use – very exciting! Also, Kieran, the head of the orphanage was back from a trip to Haiti. He gave us a brief, and sobering update on what he had seen. A quick sidebar – this orphanage also has rooms specifically for families with Cancer victims from Haiti to stay at while under the care of the clinic on site, and the cancer clinic in Santa Domingo.

Kiernan also had a little bit of bad news for Paolo and I – the concrete prep from the day before, while admirable, was not what one of the on-site Forman had expected. He wanted it bigger, and bolder. Some footings, and a pad that needed to be a little larger. We hadn't done it wrong, just not the vision that he had. Finding out that clearly we were subordinate to the Forman, we made plans to change and alter our work tomorrow. One positive note though – I did learn how to swear in Italian – thanks Paolo!

I jumped in truck number 2, which turned out to be fortuitous – rather than a quick trip home, we toured a local village, then past two major league farm team training camps, to the Blue Jays training camp. The owner of the complex had just returned from Florida, and, after some sign language with the shotgun-wielding gate guard, we were able to ask for a meeting. A tour of the site ensued. Absolutely incredible – with turf we could only dream of having at home, let alone in the orphanage.

As we were looking past third base on one of three full size major-league fields, there was a huge plume of black smoke making its way into the stratosphere. "Sugar cane burning", I asked. "No", he said, "there is a clothes factory there. They make clothes, ship them to the US, and the extras are returned. They cut them into little pieces and burn them right in that field," I couldn't help but think of the guy in the dump from the morning.... He continued, "This country will never change... Once a simple man gets better in life, once he gets more power, he forgets about the others".

DR Day 4

Scary as it is, a sense of normalcy has set in... the “routine”, the language, and the culture. Not a lot more “shock”, although living conditions in some “villages” was reinforced at the end of our day today – a little on that later. We’re starting to wake at the right time, get ready, and head out. We still get some head turns at the “hotel” we’re at in the AM - white guys in work clothes is not normal... and when we come back at the end of the day, especially with completely dirty clothes, we get even more strange looks. Many ask what we’re up to, why we don’t have more individualistic choice in clothes (we all wear the same shirts ☺). Its fun to strike up conversation about the work we’re doing, with locals, or with “foreigners”.



The pig at the corner at the highway today was evicted by a bull... actually, I think he left – the ground at his corner has been drying up steadily – even given the huge rains yesterday. The bull was enjoying his new haunt at the busiest corner. The horse that was killed on the highway two days ago is still there, and it is getting stinkier as we pass every day – poor horse! On a different note, we saw something new – a baby asleep on his father’s (I assume) shoulder racing down the road as a double on a motorcycle. Remember, 5 on a motorcycle is the record we’ve seen so far, and for a record of 5, you have to have at least one kid, usually two; but a sleeping kid was a new one. See the pictures!

Today was a huge day. Saturday at the orphanage is a “free” day for the kids. They still have lunch, breakfast, etc., but school’s out! So, intramural events are what keep them busy, and, of course, helping groups like ours.

Kids end up in the orphanage in a number of ways. They’re dropped off by parent(s) that cant care for them at churches, they are instructed to the orphanage by the sate (this shocked me) because the state’s “social services and justice system” has deemed the parents incompetent (drug abuse, physical abuse, etc...), and, simply, parents that can’t afford children they have produced. Saturday and Sunday are “visitation days”, and kids can go “home” with an escort and supervision from a volunteer, or, their parents can come to the orphanage. So, keeping the kids that don’t have “parents” busy on these days is a good thing....

The morning started with a daunting task – as I noted before, two loads of soil, and 500 square meters of “sod” had been delivered previously. All in the wrong place, making the work more challenging. I didn’t realize until about 11AM that I had forgotten to apply suntan lotion, but it didn’t matter – the dirt was protecting me!

Once we started, there were 10 kids helping, and that quickly snowballed into 15, 20, 25, 30 – 40 was the highest count I had... it was incredible. The “sod” was challenging at best, horrible at worst – a horticultural jigsaw was a great description. At home we’re used to 1’ x 9’ completely uniform rolls. Very efficient and easy. Here, every piece of dirt with a spec of grass sticking out was considered sod – some 12” x 12”, some triangles, some 12” x 2’, some 16” x 36”; a piece with parallel & perpendicular sides was an exception...you get the picture. They were all cut with a machete, not a machine. And NONE of them were rolled, all came “flat” and were “puked” off the side of the truck by the delivery truck driver as fast as possible. Consideration as to the quality of the end product once it hit the ground was not a priority. We also had to move 2 huge truckloads of soil.

Mike from Chicago was also on site helping – he was fun – he knew all the kids, and egged them on... positive operant conditioning using cola was his motivator – and it worked fabulously.

Remember, we now had two vehicles – two of us (not me) headed out in the pickup to grab supplies for Sunday – tomorrow at the village will be a big day – a community garden, trees, live fencing, chain link fencing, and a BBQ for over 700 villagers (we were feeding two different villages now). Tons of stuff needed to be picked up – and in typical Dominican style, nothing came easy. Even the 800 buns we had ordered the day before at the “jumbo” mart were not there for pick-up as we had organized just 24 hours before... another of their tasks was to grab a ton of “living” fence posts for the “fence around the fence” (see yesterday’s entry). The hardware store manager had them at his farm, but he lived across the river, and it is illegal to move them across the river. Our fearless leader correctly figured that the sticker of the orphanage, on the side of the truck, combined with the “ignorance” defense, would be our saviors, and off they went.

I would never have thought it possible, but by lunch (12:30) we had placed 95% of the sod and soil. We were assigned to the same house as on Wednesday, so back to Santa Rosa House for us. Home of the Austrian Doctor, and 20 or so very well behaved girls. Here’s an interesting juxtaposition – the loudest kid there (which really wasn’t loud at all) was a deaf girl. She had made up her own form of sign language, and had a form of grunting / humming when she needed immediate attention. I couldn’t help but wonder what future life outside of the orphanage would have in store for her, once those familiar with her special language were not at her side. I asked the doctor how she was, and she seemed a little frustrated – apparently she hadn’t had any of opportunity to practice her newly learned medical practitioner skills – I keenly offered to severely injure Paolo in the afternoon so she had a patient to work



on... she declined, citing some type of oath... ☺ Lunch was again painfully large – beans, rice, salad, and spaghetti, but I did manage to finish it all.

There wasn't as much interest in the help from the kids in the PM – I think because Chicago Mike had already divvied up all his cola just before lunch, but we did have some help. By 3PM, we were done. The “irrigation system” was completed by the head Forman, and didn't work. There wasn't enough pressure, and even with the pressure, wouldn't have come close to watering the area we had now planted... Oops. I can't tell you how frustrating it was that my specialty had resulted in a failed outcome. That said, I did console myself with the fact it was not part of the plan (in this area), and was added at the last minute...a day we were not supposed to be on site. And, someone else – the main Forman on site, owned it. This sounds like a copout, but, after a little frustration, I looked at life from his point of view – he has different “experts” and “helpers” that descend on his workplace weekly to “help” him, all with their own ideas about what's best, and how they can enrich the life of DR's on the orphanage – sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn't. Irrigation was a discipline that he felt comfortable with... well, maybe next trip...

Once we left we headed to another local village, this one more to the west. We grabbed some cold pops from a roadside stand in the middle of town. It was a very colourful gathering place for everyone – 8-10 men straddling their motorcycles under a tree on the side of the road (a common sight everywhere), and a very stinky mule with a rider passing by. The music was LOUD, and energetic. Everyone was friendly, and, as usual, we asked to see the readout on the calculator so we could understand what we owed. We had to take a picture of the live fence posts we saw stacked beside the shop – all for sale. I was going to hate to break the news to the two that split off that what we needed was so close!

Conditions in this village were again startlingly poor. Tiny homes, dirt floors, shacks and sheds everywhere that were homes for families. Very shocking to “Western” folk, but everyone was happy, and friendly.

I'm looking forward to tomorrow – another village, way past the nunnery and a 20 minute drive through the cane fields, where we will install a community garden, a “living fence”, fruit trees, and host a HUGE BBQ...

DR day 5

I'm a little (lot) late on this post.

Wow, what a day. Probably one of the most rewarding days of my life.

Day 1 had us driving through the very villages we had now helped, villages where we had stopped, stayed, and met and talked, and broken bread with many of the locals. It is a strange feeling that is hard to put into words. By the end of the day, I actually felt guilty for the apprehension I felt driving through these villages on day 1. The people are very friendly, hard working, and, as strange as it may sound, happy. I'm sure they want more – we all do. They are proud of their homes, and especially their kids. They had a significant sense of ownership, not only for their village, but also for the project we were helping them with. An incredible sense of community. The funny thing is, the feelings don't fit the picture....the pride doesn't fit the landscape. How could this be?

Think of all the things that you need in a day, basic things. Safety, security, food, water, companionship, fulfillment, respect, appreciation, care, clothing. The village had all of this, but, at a significantly different standard than we're (I'm) used to. This was the biggest part that surprised me.

That said, life in the village isn't all good. They have food, but not much; they have clothing, but it is scarce; they have appreciation and fulfillment, but I think it is only at a local level, certainly not on a more macro level.

It is curious how the help we have doled out has taken us on a few different journeys on this trip. I thought the main focus was to be the orphanage – and really it has been as far as time-spent is concerned. But if there were ever an ROI for humanitarian aid, the villages were clear winners. The orphanage, again by western standards, is needy, has needs. But the villages are on such a completely different level it is hard to explain. The orphanage has proved to be an exceptional platform for helping the villages. Their logo'd trucks are known and respected, as are the people that run it. The same can be said for the nunnery. And, the orphanage had tools, equipment, and contacts that enabled us to help the villages. One of the leaders was concerned that the orphanage might take offense to the amount we were helping others, especially considering the amount we were using their support – this proved to be much ado about nothing – they confirmed that villager support, in fact, helped the orphanage.



Day 5 started with the usual debriefing around the breakfast table. Trucks and people were heading in all different directions to grab people and parts. I opted to go directly to the village site with Jerry – the Rotarian, and Paolo and Jesse, in the hopes that we could get started ASAP.

We had been to the village that was about 25 minutes off the main highway, through the cane fields, earlier in the week. Since then, Jerry had been back – he had attached the metal top rail to the fence that his Rotarians installed the year previous. The fenced in area was to be a community garden. It was approximately 35' x 50', and the chain link fence was crucial to keep out the pigs, goats, horses, and cows that roamed the village freely. We were also adding a small orchard. An "L" shaped 15' wide additional fenced-in area that shared two sides of the chain link fence was to be added today too. Inside would house mandarin, orange, and lime trees, as well as two "bread" trees. The fencing we installed was to be the natural "living" fence (see previous posts) with barbed wire, and a barbed-wire gate.

We were met with help almost immediately. With zero communication between our group and the villagers, we worked surprisingly efficiently. It was a funny situation, because in the beginning of the day, I was very concerned with safety. Not only for my "stuff", but also for ourselves. There was no need to be – they weren't out "to get us", but it was a very foreign situation for me, and it took some time to get used to. Also curious is how loudly the locals talk, I should say, yell! It takes a while to get used to the fact that everyday conversation is communicated with staccato shouting, rather than moderated speech. A little unnerving the beginning was.



We made fabulous progress, and had all the trees planted (30) and the main post holes dug and ready for the “living” main posts once they arrived. Truck number 1 arrived with the living fence posts and work started on it immediately. Once the posts were in, the barbed wire installation began – what a task – even with gloves, no one was left without a bloody leg or arm. It’s a wonder we weren’t popping anti-bacterial pills that night...

Truck #2 soon arrived with the rototiller from the orphanage, and Alex went to work quickly within the chain link fencing – the locals had let chickens, goats and pigs graze within its confines over the last year, and it was ready and ripe!

I got to work closely with Rosa, one of the older villagers. Through broken Spanish I figured she had 10 kids, and lived behind the ball field. Baseball was being played almost the entire day – it was a jubilant and raucous scene – they loved their baseball! Rosa was a hard working lady, with a great smile, and seemed to know what I needed before I knew...this wasn’t her first rodeo!



Once the fence work came to a close, work started to connect the water pipe at the main water outlet across the road to the community garden. “Road trains” – trucks with 3 huge trailers full of sugar cane, frequent the road. Many are beaten-up shadows of their once new form –



missing hoods, wheels, windshields, etc. It was usual to see trucks and trailers with half the tires flat. Needless to say, the ground was ridiculously hard. Pry bar hit, by pry bar hit, over the course of an hour, with 2-6 people working at any one time, and we had ourselves a trench. In went the metal sleeves, and the tubing within that would bring the water into the community garden.

Truck number 3 arrived – and so did the beginnings of the grand finale. All the characters were there: Itilina from the nunnery, Mary Joe from the Orphanage, Mary Joe’s brother James from Detroit, all of us, the mayor Renalto, and Carlos, Jerry’s interpreter. Truck number 3 had all the food and goodies we were handing out. Our leaders Ryan and Kalun primed and lit the charcoal in the BBQ that Alex had rebuilt the day before, and the inside crew readied over 700 hot dogs, buns, lollipops, cookies, napkins, and pop for the village. It was a monumental task. I kept taking pictures of the scene and the villagers – and love pictures they did. Pictures were repetitious but unique with every soul that jumped (sometimes pushed) in front of the lens – every picture was followed by an immediate need to see the image on the screen of the camera. One person’s picture spurred on 4 more with their friends and family.

Security was a large concern. Last year a near riot ensued, for a number of easily solvable reasons. Firstly, the BBQ last year was only for kids, making parents and teenagers into thieves when they realized they didn't get any. Secondly, the area was not tightly controlled, so there was pushing and shoving to get into, and back out of line. Thirdly, there was no control of portions, and lastly, locals were enlisted to hand out, creating conflict and favoritism. All those issues had been solved this year and the BBQ ran smoothly, and efficiently. Some had seconds and thirds, and we decided to cook about 200 more and take with us to the tiny village on the way back to the highway, Consuelita.

Everywhere we've gone, there are tiny "cantinas" with cold beer, pop, and rum. They play loud music, and are very decentralized gathering places for the various villages. Renalto's place was just this. So, we asked him to crank up the music during the BBQ – it was fabulous. The BBQ lasted a long 1-½ hours, after which we handed out shirts, bats (we had brought over 40 of them) and some other toys we had brought with us.

Much to the chagrin of our newly made friends, we packed up and left, but it wasn't without issue. Everyone could see that we still had lots of stuff in our vans, and we were loading trays of hotdogs into the truck too. It was a little tense getting out, but again, maybe this was just my nerves getting to me...

25 minutes down the road, we surprised the villagers of Consuelita with hot dogs, pop, toys, and cookies. The speed with which the "central" village area went from empty to teeming with people was on par with military precision. Orderly lines were formed, and we handed out the last 200 portions. We asked one of the villagers for some sugar cane, to which he immediately ran to grab some from the field, and cut and peeled it. The bark was easily peeled with his machete. By now I had seen what a machete gets used for in these parts, which is pretty much everything – and it is stored in a holster, or, more commonly, on the ground. I've seen them used for thinning foliage, killing tarantulas, beheading centipedes, and poking at dead carcasses, and everything in between. My mind told me I shouldn't eat the sugar cane, but curiosity overcame reason, and I chowed down – what an awesome treat!

The sun was coming down, fires in the cane fields were raging, and we were heading out of the last village with sticky hands, big smiles, and full hearts. We made one final stop for some cold beer at the cantina in Consuela. At this point it was completely dark, and Consuela was a much bigger village, more like a town. The cantina was loud, and filled with folks, motorcycles lined up haphazardly along the road, and locals "talking" as loud as the dust-strewn trucks racing by 3' from the concrete edge of the cantina. Music was distorting the huge speakers that hung from the pock-marked brick and concrete walls. The checker game that was underway with its contrasting white and black chips was a fitting metaphor for the last moments of the day. I felt right at home.

DR Day 6

A much different feel today – our last day.

After a long day yesterday, and the emotional largesse that accompanied our “finale”, going back to some simple and modest chores was a rough one.

Two group members were to leave later today, so we were only planning to work until noon. Off to the orphanage we went. We had heard a rumor that MORE turf was delivered the day previous, and we weren’t looking forward to dealing with it.

Sure enough, a huge pile of ant and potentially-tarantula infested turf was waiting for



us. We slogged through it, and took off at noon.

We said our goodbyes to Mary Joe, Mike from Chicago, James from Detroit, Kiernan the school master, and, Dr. Astrid from Austria.... A few of the many kids we had met were there too.

I had brought all my clothes from my pack that I hadn’t used, and a few I had. I also brought my shoes and a spare pair of sandals. When you’ve spent the day being outworked by a man wearing a pair of muddy Adidas shoes that are so worn out, they look more like sandals; they’ve earned the right to what you don’t appreciate as much. I gave it all away to the locals, including my work boots.

The ride home was in “big blue”, the open-air recently repaired truck complete with seats – I found out very quickly to keep your mouth shut. I think my kidneys were also bumped out of alignment... Fresh warm air, sun, and a breeze in my face, I retreated back to normal life. One I’ll certainly appreciate far more.

Bumping along the now familiar road, I wondered whom this trip had affected more, them, or me.

The Participants



Ryan Vincent
COO and part-owner of Nutrilawn.



Jordan Lavin
CEO of Nutrilawn



Kalon Fairclough
Franchise Liaison for Nutrilawn



Jesse Montpellier
Ottawa



Paolo Munegatto
Pronto Enterprises, Kelowna



Peter Bugden
A Nutrilawn franchise owner from Halifax, Nova Scotia



Gerry Pierce, A Rotarian from Halifax, Nova Scotia. His group had already installed the chain link fence for the Community Garden in Vasca village the year prior. He's a fireman, and realtor, a father and grandfather.



Terry Ormrod
TORO Canadian Sales Manager
Kamloops, BC



David Pfortmueller
VP, University Sprinklers
Vancouver, BC



Sue Kemp
Whidby Ontario
NutriLawn