

PONTIFICAL MISSION SOCIETIES

Youth Volunteers Answer God's Call to Serve in Banica

By **Sandy Bertini**
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Mark 10:17:
As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" ...

Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," He said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.

In the Diocese of Arlington, there are five young men and women who did not go away sad when they heard the call of Christ. Samantha Kepler, Brendan Reiser, Sarah Sierralta, Mairin Vieira, and Isaac Kassock accepted the personal invitation, raised the necessary funds, postponed careers, gave up secure positions, and followed Christ to serve his people in the Dominican Republic. They, unlike the man in the bible passage, are filled with joy.

It is joy that fills the conversation with these volunteers. No one complains about the inconsistency of electricity, or the primitive restroom facilities, or the extreme heat, or even the tarantulas. Each volunteer came for a different reason, and none feels disappointed.



Priests and volunteers currently serving in the Dominican Republic: Back Row, from left: Brendan Reiser, Fr. Keith O'Hare, Isaac Kassock. Front row, from left: Sarah Sierralta, Samantha Kepler, Mairin Vieira, Tom Brock and Fr. Christopher Murphy.

Samantha Kepler, a former elementary school teacher at St. Louis Parish, knew she wanted to do mission work. "I had no doubts. I started to ask around, and everyone told me to get in touch with Fr. Murphy (Pastor of the diocesan mission in Pedro Santana). He invited me down; I visited for a week, and once again knew this was right for me. In two months I had raised the necessary funds and came to Banica. It definitely is the right place for me."



Sarah receives a group hug from her catechism students.

Isaac Kassock simply heard Fr. Fred Edlefsen, chaplain at the University of Mary Washington, announce after Mass one Sunday that volunteers were needed in Banica. At first Isaac thought he would like to do mission work in Alaska, but he chose Banica because of the natural connection with the diocese. "I had planned to teach school in Northern Virginia, but that didn't pan out either. The next thing I knew, I was teaching school, but in Spanish, and in the Dominican Republic! What can I say, but stay open to God's plan." The volunteers have different ministries but the same goal: to bring the word and love of God to His people. Examples include sports activities, Bible study for girls, and showing movies in the campos (there is no movie theatre within a 2 hour drive). According to Fr. O'Hare, current pastor in Banica, their most enduring gift, however, is their own example of faith and virtue.

Brendan and Mairin teach English in the parish school during the week and catechesis on the weekend in the campos, the villages found high in the mountains around Banica. As a special project, they have started a sports league for the children, since their first observation of the children playing together was that they lacked sportsmanship skills. "The children would cheat; they wouldn't play fair, they did whatever it took to win. We have very strict rules: no foul language, no cheating, no fights," Brendan and Maureen explain. "The kids learn their sports from playing on the public volleyball court where adults play as well. There is a terrible 'macho' attitude that the kids pick up and carry into their everyday lives. We are hoping to change that." The new league has 40 children who attend practice in groups of 20, once a week. Girls as well as boys are invited to play kickball, baseball, and basketball, and learn new life skills that will hopefully carry into their personal interactions on all levels.

Sarah Sierralta, a recent arrival, explained that the beginning of the experience is not always easy. "I am living with a family in the town. It took me awhile to get used to going outside to use the restroom, and for the first week I was covered in bug bites. That discomfort was soon replaced with the happiness of teaching catechesis to students, interacting with the people, and sharing my days with my fellow volunteers. My parents were very concerned that I passed up grad school to do this, but through our phone

conversations, they can see that I am developing life skills I could never have gotten any other way."

Fr. O'Hare finds unexpected benefits for the volunteers in the program. "All volunteers experience a peace through living here. The parishioners are nearly all simple farmers and so that lifestyle slows life down to a very peaceful pace. It's hard to meet a stressed-out Dominican! The day begins with daily Mass and the praying of Morning Prayer together. After breakfast with their respective host families, each volunteer goes out to the campos to teach catechism in one of the public schools (Church and state get along very well here!) The volunteers eat lunch together and then prepare for other activities with youth in the afternoon or evening."

The volunteers all agree that it can get tough and be lonely living so far from home and in such poverty, yet Mairin summed up their common reaction to the experience thus far. "What do I want to bring home from all this? I want to be able to take this joy I feel working with these kids and I want to translate it into joy for Christ, then feel that joy in myself and share it with everyone I meet."

The Young Adult Missionary Program offers the opportunity to serve from 6 months to 2 years in Banica. Applicants must have the recommendation of a priest and be interviewed by the current pastor or other priest who has served in Banica. The young adult must be a practicing Catholic who wants to evangelize youth. There are already 3 young adults expressing interest in serving during the next 2 years. All are welcome to apply. Simply email Fr. O'Hare at frohare@yahoo.com... and go away filled with joy.



Sam and Brendan bring the word of God to the children of the campos.

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