

Humanitarian helps in Cuba, Haiti

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CHESTER TWP., NJ: When township resident Constantine Mavraganis travels abroad, he doesn't stay in fancy resorts with five-star spas or restaurants.

Instead he volunteers in small villages without running water and where paved roads are an anomaly.

For Mavraganis, known as "Gus," volunteering in developing countries is not just a hobby, it's a passion.

In 1999, he started the "Cuba AIDS Project," a non-profit organization that provides medical help to AIDS patients in Cuba. And a few months ago, he started "Hands for Humanity," another non-profit organization that seeks to provide clean water, sanitation and affordable housing among other services to people in the Dominican Republic and Haiti.

Mavraganis's desire to make a difference can be traced back to his childhood in Morristown, when his parents sent him to stay with an uncle in Greece, like they did every summer, to "keep me out of trouble," he said.

"Not that I ever got in trouble," he added

One summer in Greece when Mavraganis was 12, he told his uncle he was going to Athens to visit a friend. He did go to Athens, but he didn't stay for long. Instead, Mavraganis decided at the last minute to take a boat from a nearby port city to Cairo.

"I was always an adventurous soul," he said.

When he arrived in Cairo, he boarded a tour bus that took him throughout the city and eventually to a nearby slum, where Mavraganis said he saw tens of thousands of people living in alleys and trash dumps, in what he described as unimaginable conditions.

"I was shell shocked and it completely changed me forever," he said.

That image remains with Mavraganis as he travels to similar places in Haiti, the Dominican Republic and Cuba, hoping to make a difference.

Former Life

But before Mavraganis started his two organizations, he was a chef for 20 years, and owned three restaurants, including the Windfall in Randolph Township for three years.

A car accident led to back problems and forced him off his feet for more than a year. He's since been a real estate agent with ReMax Properties Unlimited in Morristown, which gives him the flexibility he needs to plan his humanitarian trips.

Increased travel restrictions in 2005 between the U.S. and Cuba limited Mavraganis's groups to 20 people who must be medical professionals. This has also limited the scope of work that Cuba AIDS can do there, he said.

Whereas before volunteers of all ages and educational backgrounds could paint buildings or help build new homes, work is now limited to clinics, Mavraganis said.

Under the restrictions, he has still been able to take groups from several universities throughout the country, including the University of Michigan Medical School.

The organization must renew its license with the U.S. Treasury Department every year, but Mavraganis said

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it's all been worth it.

On an earlier trip, Mavraganis helped a 40-year old mother of four outside Havana, who is HIV positive and whose house was recently destroyed by a storm.

"She looks 70," he said. "She's trying so hard to get her house done so her kids have somewhere to live when she dies."

Mavraganis said helping people is always a wake up call, no matter how many times he goes down there.

"And we're here complaining because they canceled our favorite TV show for baseball, or something," he said. "It's very, very humbling."

Mavraganis will take his first group of about 15 volunteers to the Dominican Republic in November on behalf of Hands of Humanity. The group will help renovate an old church in the village of Palave, outside Santo Domingo. They will replace the roof, paint the building, and provide new furniture so that the building can also serve as a community center for local children.

The \$1,500 that Hands of Humanity put toward the church renovation project was raised through the \$1,100 trip participant fee that also covers food, transportation and other necessities for each volunteer, Mavraganis said.

"It's amazing what you can do with so little money," he said.

They will also help to make school a reality by providing children with mandatory school uniforms.

In the Dominican Republic, school uniforms cost 2500 pesos, Mavraganis said, which is more money than some families make in a month.

"We have a group of women down there who said they'd buy the fabric themselves and sew the uniforms," he said.

So Mavraganis, whose mother-in-law was a seamstress, has been collecting old sewing machines to send to the village.

Mavraganis has also started collecting baseball bats and gloves that he will take with him on the November trip.

"I noticed kids were playing baseball with a stick and plastic water bottles filled with sand," he said.

He said one of his goals is to create a village baseball league. So far he's collected 20 bats and 50 balls.

The group will also help dig wells and latrines because the village has no running water.

The situation in Haiti is even worse, Mavraganis said, where the average pay is \$2 per day and half the population is without running water.

"It's mind boggling," he said. "Can you imagine working three days out of the month to pay for rice?"

Mavraganis said he remembers standing on a road that connects the Dominican Republic to Haiti and looking over into Haiti.

"It's almost like you're looking into hell," he said.

Hands of Humanity's goals in Haiti are the same as those in the Dominican Republic: To help provide running water, sanitation and affordable housing.

"I think it's a basic human right for everyone to have clean water, sanitation and affordable housing,"

Mavraganis said.

Mavraganis said he hopes to take his first group to Haiti in December, although difficulties in making travel arrangements in the country might push that date back.

He also said he wants to set up summer programs for 2009 targeted at high school and college students, because he said it's important for people to experience the developing world while they're still young.

"Often people go on these trips with an idea that they are going to help these people change their lives,"

Mavraganis said. "I always tell people be careful because the life you change might be your own."