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Solar Oven Partners UMC

Dakotas Conference Mission Newsletter for SOP UMC

Taking Mission Full Circle *By Connie Smith*

Volunteers are the heartbeat of Solar Oven Partners. Each solar oven that reaches a family in need has the invisible imprint of the many hands helping in SOP's workshops, at home on sewing machines, or in churches across the Dakotas and Minnesota.

Often, those "at home" volunteers take the next leap of faith, joining an SOP Volunteer in Mission (VIM) team to the Dominican Republic, Sierra Leone, or the Navajo Nation in Arizona. It's then that they experience the final link in the SOP ministry—placing that solar oven package in the hands of people for whom it can make a life-changing difference.

That "leap" was evident in the two most recent VIM teams to the Dominican Republic, one in

January and the other in March. In January, five of the 11-member team had volunteered in various ways and were making their first mission trip with SOP. In March, two long-time volunteers, Larry and Connie Zimmer of Montrose United Methodist Church (UMC) in Montrose, SD, followed through with their mission trip commitment.

Larry's volunteer involvement began at the original workshop in Volga. Since then he has traveled to the workshop in Raymond and is a frequent volunteer at the Montrose workshop—working on oven components. Connie sews potholders, bread cloths and cloth bags for the oven's utensils. "We knew," says Connie, "that when we retired, making a mission trip with SOP was one thing we wanted to do."

Discovering a direct link

It was meaningful, then, for Connie and Larry to see actual examples of their volunteer work show up in the Dominican Republic. On an overcast day, when the team couldn't use the ovens to cook for seminar participants, a woman nearby let the team cook food in her home. "We wanted to give her a thank you gift and decided to give her a pair of potholders," says Connie. Looking for a pair to choose, SOP Director Marj Evans-de-Carpio pulled some out of storage and Connie excitedly spotted a pair she had made back home. "I recognized the

(Cont. pg. 2)



Connie Zimmer of Montrose, SD, with the recipient of a potholder that she had sewn.



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- UMCOR Advance #418812...Online Giving Link <https://www.umcor.org/UMCOR/Donate/Donation-Form?type=1002&project=418812>

*Check out web site: solarovenpartnersumc.org
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Full Circle (cont.)



Harvey Spieker sets an oven frame in the jig.

fabric and the way it was sewn," she says.

Larry had a similar experience. "I was unpacking a box of oven components and found a checklist signed by Bill (a friend from Montrose)," says Larry. "He had helped packed the box for shipping when some of us went to the Raymond workshop." Both incidents illustrated that their volunteer work back home has an impact. "Everything that people do," says Connie, "whether it's making a potholder or packing a box, makes a difference."

For Harvey Spieker, the decision to join the January team was driven, in part, by curiosity. The retired dentist from Clark, SD, got involved a few years ago when he was part of a group that gathered at the Raymond, SD, workshop to form about 1,000 stainless steel bread pans. In November, he helped load a 40-foot shipping container with ovens. In January, he headed to the Dominican Republic. "I wanted to see where the ovens went, who got

them and how they were distributed," explains Harvey.

The reasons volunteers give for making that first SOP mission trip vary, but for many, there's a sense of call. "I'm not a risk taker, I'm a home body, but God was putting pieces into place," recalls Susan Berard, a member of the Elk River UMC in Minnesota. Those "pieces" included making potholders and traveling with a small group, including fellow church member Jeneyene Sitts, to the Zeeland, ND, workshop to make oven reflectors. In January, they both joined the VIM team.



Jeneyene Sitts, who sliced metal for the exterior reflectors at the shop in Zeeland, ND, bends the metal for an interior reflector in the Dominican Republic.

Seeing joy first-hand

The women are convinced seeing SOP's ministry in action made the hours spent volunteering at home even more meaningful. "It's one thing to hear about how the ovens work," says Susan, "but it's something else when you see the process and the joy people have when they put the ovens on their motorbikes and head off with big smiles."

That joy was especially evident when the January team faced a shortage of ovens due to SOP's shipping container being held up at the Dominican Republic port. When the team showed up at its first seminar, 139 people were waiting for the two-day training, after which families expected to take ovens home. "When we explained that we would only be able to give out 20 ovens at the end of the seminar, and that others would receive their ovens later, the people were not upset," says Jeneyene, adding that the Dominican people came up with their own name-drawing system to use in distributing the 20 ovens.

Team members were amazed at the response when each of those 20 names was drawn. "People were clapping and cheering even though they weren't the ones whose names were called," says Harvey. "It was quite an experience to see people so happy to be part of this, even though they didn't end up with an oven right then."

Spreading the mission passion

Clinton Rutledge, another member of that team, is part of a youth group from South Dakota's Clark UMC that helped pack and stack boxes of ovens to prepare for shipping at the Raymond workshop. A

junior in high school, he was inspired to take the mission trip by Raymond Workshop Manager Gene Bethke. "I got to thinking," says Clinton, "if I went it would be a once-in-a-lifetime experience as a high schooler."

That experience was everything and more than Clinton expected. "I was nervous at first because I've never been outside the country before," he says, "but if I go next year, which I really want to do, I'm trying to convince others from school to go, too."

That encouragement for others to get involved in missions is music to Rennae Petersen's ears. She chairs the Hands-on Committee at Cornerstone UMC in Marshall, MN, where members have been involved in SOP by assembling the WAPI's (water purification indicators) that are included in each oven package, cutting cardboard for the bottom of the oven box, and sewing. Members, including Rennae, have also made three trips to the Raymond workshop, and she, too, joined an SOP VIM team for the first time in January. "Christian witness is stronger if we have experiences that help us to be empathetic and allow us to understand that we're all God's creation," says Rennae. "If we can do things to help make the lives of people around us and in other parts of the world better—well, that's all part of mission."



Rennae Petersen and Clint Rutledge send a couple on their way with their new solar oven.



Susan Berard shares a laugh with seminar attendee, Profeta, before saying goodbye. Profeta obtained an oven in January and organized a seminar in her Haitian community about an hour away for the team that came in March!

Coming Home to Quarantine *By Donna Fischer*

When 11 volunteers left for the Dominican Republic on March 6, they expected their hearts to be altered by their experiences. That's what happens on mission trips! What they didn't expect was that they would return to find their own country changed, too.

In early March, COVID-19 concern was just beginning to rise in the States, and public messaging advised frequent hand-washing, extra groceries and staying home for two weeks if one became ill. There was only one COVID-19 case in the Dominican Republic four days prior to departure, and that was an Italian tourist whom Dominican authorities quarantined.

Director Marj Evans-de-Carpio sought out advice from the State Department, Centers for Disease Control and World Health Organization websites as well as from Solar Oven Partners' travel agent. There were no advisories against travel to the Dominican Republic at the time. After weighing all the information, Marj decided to proceed with March 6-16 travel plans.

Marj's daughter Pangea Carpio-Evans says, "We knew there was some risk. Looking back on our trip, it was an almost surreal experience before everything changed at home; now it seems like kind of a nice last hurrah."

Pangea, Connie and Larry Zimmer, Connie Hubbard and Katie Clark never guessed they would return to cancelled school, lost jobs, and even quarantine away from family and friends. Here are their stories:

Connie Hubbard, Spearfish, SD, is an experienced traveler. "We arrived in the U.S. just before tight restrictions were placed on entering the country," says Connie. "Friends at home were texting me saying that we'd be lucky to get back into the country without waiting for hours in line. It was a bit unnerving seeing the face masks and seeing the airports half full as opposed to teeming with people on a normal trip."



Connie Hubbard prepares food with Profeta in a home next to our workshop site. After returning, she reflects, "We have no idea how to make do without the luxuries we have grown accustomed to taking for granted. The bright side of this is perhaps the slap in the face that we need. That's the thing I notice most when I go on a mission trip: how possible it is to live on very little and how content the people are living with so very little."

not be able to go home (to Valley City)," explains Katie. "I was finally able to come home March 30 after my quarantine was up. By this point, BHSU classes were officially online the rest of the semester...I totally understand and respect the extreme cautions that the health facilities in Valley City are taking to guarantee that the individuals are safe, but it has been hard to not see all of my family."



Shortly after they got home, Pangea Carpio-Evans learned that the Dominican Republic went on strict lockdown, enforcing curfews from 6 p.m. to 5 a.m. "My mom reminded me that they have more experience at managing pandemics," says Pangea. "They probably have developed survival and managing skills that we don't have because of our more comfortable life style."

Pangea has traveled to the Dominican Republic many times. "After being in noisy crowded Dominican communities, the most surreal things were Atlanta and Minneapolis—those big international airports," recalls Pangea. "I'd been in those airports at 3 or 4 a.m.; this time they were emptier at midday than in those early hours." She and her mother drove straight home from Sioux Falls to self-quarantine; the next day, Pangea learned her workplace had closed and she had lost her job.

When Larry and Connie Zimmer, Montrose, SD, boarded the plane in Santo Domingo, they were eager to reunite with their children and grandchildren. "We heard on the way home that South Dakota had closed schools," says Connie. "We texted our kids from the Atlanta airport. They told us they would bring our dog to our place along with groceries that they'd leave on the porch. They expected us to self-quarantine for 10 days because we had been in and out of several airports."

Katie Clark, Valley City, ND, a junior at Black Hills State University (BHSU), also works at Spearfish United Methodist Church as children's ministries coordinator. "I learned at the airport in Atlanta that I would



Katie Clark assembles ovens at a seminar site in the Dominican Republic together with the prospective oven recipients.

Quarantine (cont.)



Connie and Larry Zimmer at the Atlantic shoreline on a break from oven assembly and distribution.

Although they had returned to restrictions, team members recognized that for people in the Dominican villages that they had visited, containing the COVID-19 might be even more difficult. "I imagine community spread would be a big deal," says Katie. "I noticed that so many people are together, big families in a small house, and neighbors reaching out to one another."

Living 10 days as a mission volunteer prepared her better for her homecoming, says Connie Hubbard. "If anything, travel to a developing country like the DR prepared us to tolerate sacrificing certain comforts of home," Connie says. "I feel like the citizens of the U.S. are unprepared, maybe even unable to do without. Witness the toilet paper hoarding."

For now, and as long as needed, Katie says she will practice social distancing without complaining. "I have family members who work as caregivers," she says. "My brother lives in one of the homes we care for. I will practice social distancing for those individuals who would not survive if they were to get sick."

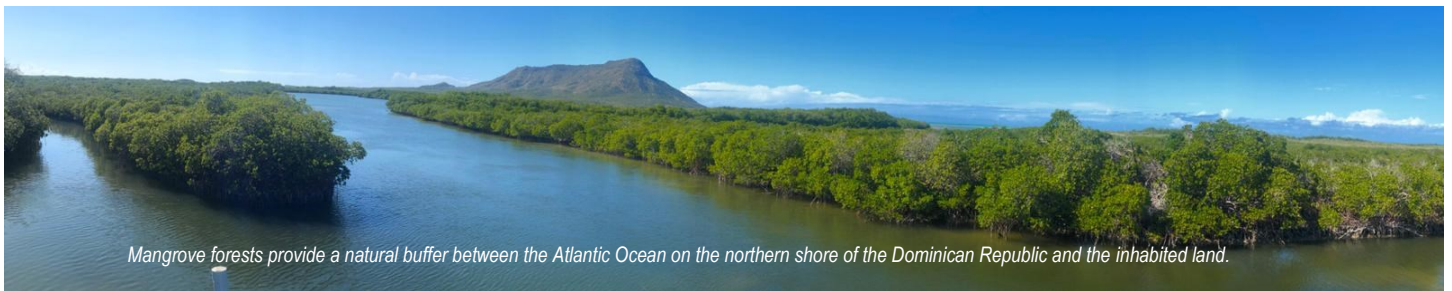
Connie Hubbard, the Zimmers and the rest of the team returned to a strange new normal. "The new normal is hard," Connie Zimmer says, "Here you shake hands, you greet people who are family and church friends. It's hard not to be able to see them or greet them. Whenever we get out of this, we're going to be so grateful for what we have."



Separated by miles but united in coping with the impact of COVID-19, Connie Zimmer thinks about the Dominicans she's met. "Those families who have ovens now will be safer because they won't have to go out to buy or look for wood," Connie says. "Everywhere we saw big blue plastic bottles for drinking water. There are water faucets in communities but that water is not safe. People with solar ovens and WAPI devices can pasteurize water for drinking and cooking and be safe."



One last hurrah! The last day in the Dominican Republic was in-country director Erasme Figaro's birthday. The team arranged for a surprise birthday party at the home of one of his parishioners.



Mangrove forests provide a natural buffer between the Atlantic Ocean on the northern shore of the Dominican Republic and the inhabited land.

Spread the Love

Profeta, twice pictured on the other side of this sheet in March with Connie and on page 2 in January with Susan, is an example of oven recipients who travel to a seminar and then arrange for a future team to come share to their hometown. To do this, they work with our in-country director, Rev. Erasme Figaro, to secure a location and related logistics. Then they work with the community to publicize the seminar prior to the team's arrival. Profeta was among those whose name was drawn to receive her oven on the seminar day. What a joyful noise she made! After taking her oven home from Loma de Cabrera, Profeta arranged for our March team to go to her hometown of Anacahona, a Haitian community on the border.

Ovens During Shelter-in-Place

A few days after our team departed, the president of the Dominican Republic ordered everyone to shelter in place. A strict curfew from 5 p.m. to 6 a.m. was instituted. When people are allowed out of their homes, social distancing is required and activities are restricted to essentials such as purchasing food. Military roadblocks were put up between provinces, prohibiting travel.

In-country director Rev. Erasme Figaro has been able to communicate with some of the pastors where we have done distributions. He has heard back from two people:

"God bless you. The sun is really good today and we are making two delicious cakes. The temperature is excellent. Thanks be to God for this beautiful gift."

"I am one of the fortunate one with and oven that you gave to me. I am from La Gorra. Mie niece wants one. How could she get it? She lives in Santiago but she is here until all this is over, God willing. She tasted a cake and some bread that I made and she just loved it!"

Grandma, Granddaughters Serve Together *By Deb Holland*

In a matter of 10 days, Patty Phillips and her granddaughters made memories to last a lifetime. Phillips and her granddaughters, Mya Maxwell, 18, Bella Maxwell, 16, and Anna Gross, 15, were among a mission contingent with Solar Oven Partners to the Dominican Republic in early March. Grandma and the girls all live in the Madison, SD, area.

Phillips, who has twice before gone on mission trips with SOP, says she felt God's nudging to take her granddaughters on a trip. Phillips jokes that she didn't know if her teen granddaughters would whine or complain during the trip, but says she was pleasantly surprised by their exuberance.

"Honestly, I was really amazed. They didn't complain or whine," she says. "It was a wonderful feeling to see them working and sharing with the Dominicans. I think God was smiling down on all of us."

Mya admits that she thought her grandmother was kidding when she first brought up the notion of going on the mission trip to the Dominican Republic. But once they arrived in country, she realized what a valuable experience the SOP mission trip was. "For me it was a real eye-opener," she says.

Mya even wrote about the trip for her home church's newsletter.

"My time spent there was filled with hard work, gross hotel rooms, hot and humid weather, and freezing cold showers," she wrote.



Mya and Bella Maxwell, Anna Gross and Patty Phillips

"But the people there were friendly and greeted others with genuine smiles and warm welcomes. They even jumped in to help us build the ovens, to the point where they'd take the hammer out of your hand. We will never forget our time in the Dominican Republic, as it forever changed our hearts and lives,"

Bella Maxwell says she has gained a new appreciation for the blessings in her life. "I loved seeing how happy the people were without all the things we think are necessary. They had close bonds with friends and neighbors and they had next to nothing," she says.

Phillips also says she was pleased with how well her granddaughters interacted with the children of the Dominican Republic. In a country where the sun shines more than 70 percent of the time, it rained for two days during their March mission trip. That proved to be an opportunity for the girls and a college student on the team to spend time in the elementary and high schools. Mya said they forged a real connection between the students of the Dominican school and the "Americano" students.

Upon reflection, both Phillips and her granddaughters say they are filled with gratitude for sharing the mission experience. "We were already pretty close, but being stuck in a motel room with your grandma for 10 days, you have an even closer bond," Bella says.

Meet the Rest of the Team Members



Gene Bethke, January



Karen Bolton, January



Ruth Olson-Bahe, January



Shirley Vearrier, January



Scott McKirdy, March



Colleen McKirdy, March



Paul Hildgedick, January



Rita Hildgedick, January

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RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

Reflector Workshop on the Move! *By Marj Evans-de-Carpio, SOP Director*

How do you turn a nearly 700-pound-spool of anodized aluminum into hundreds of solar oven reflectors? Start with engineering genius and creativity, add the dedicated work of volunteer teams, infuse with the essence of Christian love and mix thoroughly in a workshop space. When it comes to the reflector, Solar Oven Partners' (SOP) Board member Dave Silbernagel has been the driving force for years. He contributed the genius and creativity in terms of tools, machines and processes used to cut, bend, punch and rivet the aluminum. He and his wife, Renae, have hosted the reflector workshop on their property, beginning in 2012 in Moffit, ND. More recently, the

back portion of their truck repair business in Zeeland has been the site of the workshop, but now their business is growing and requires that space.

Meanwhile, for years SOP supporters on the western side of the Dakotas Conference have been asking for a workshop closer to home. When I asked our board members to check for prospective locations, God provided! Open Heart United

Methodist Church in Rapid City stepped forward, offering a new home! We are excited about the ministry opportunities that this new partnership offers. With a large population in Rapid City and nearby Sturgis and Spearfish, we anticipate many more teams will be able to participate. While this new site might be farther away for some of you, consider adding a day or two and making it a service retreat, staying at Storm Mountain, our United Methodist camp in the beautiful Black Hills.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, we planned to move the workshop in April, launching it at the end of May. That timeline is now on hold. Instead, it will happen when the health and safety of our volunteers will not be compromised. Watch for updates at facebook.com/solarovenpartnersumc or sign up for our electronic *Update* newsletter by emailing office@solarovenpartners.org.



With deepest gratitude to Dave and Renae Silbernagel for their years of generously giving their resources, skills, knowledge and time to the Solar Oven Partners reflector workshop, and their continued generosity in helping the new location to be successful. Dave will continue to share his gifts as a member of the Board of Directors..



The coil of aluminum we start with to build solar oven reflectors is not easily maneuvered.