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FEATURES

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Trip aims to aid villagers

Students travel for service, culture

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In the steamy, tropical jungles and mountains of the Toledo District of Belize lay several small villages connected by winding roads, which are difficult to travel.

The sparsely populated district has only about 23,000 people, according to a 2000 census, and is the poorest part of the small, Central American country.

This summer, eight students, accompanied by Fr. Ian Gibbons, SJ, and Miss Katie Mertz, will travel to the Toledo District. They will use money raised during Mission Week to build a school in the small village of Sunday Wood and help out in other projects around Punta Gorda, the capital of Toledo.

Before they can build the school, however, these eight students have to get there first. On the morning of May 27, senior Brian Wieliczka, juniors Brad Fowler, Tommy Larsen, Brad Miller, Matt Pennington, Daniel Santiago, Ben Schario and freshmen Kevin McNamara will meet at Kansas City International Airport to begin their journey to Belize.

After the flight to Belize City, they will board a 15-passenger van and ride for over four hours to Punta Gorda. Because of the poor condition of the roads, getting to Sunday Wood takes an additional hour of driving the next morning, although the town is only 13 miles away.

"It's off the beaten path," Fr. Gibbons said. "[It] used to take about ten hours drive to get down there, and you have to remember Belize is a very small country, so that's more a statement of the condition of the roads. Now it's about four and a half hours to get there [to Punta Gorda], so things are really improving."

While travel has become less difficult, it still isn't easy, and that can severely limit those in the small, secluded villages. For residents of Sunday Wood, the nearest school is a few miles away in the village of Conejo, which, according to Fr. Gibbons, "might as well be on the moon." This contributes to a very low level of education among the villagers.

"If an adolescent gets through about grade six, that's about as good as it's going to get. That would be a high achiever for that family. There just aren't a lot of opportunities for education," Fr. Gibbons said.

The school that the group is going to build in Sunday Wood will serve about 50 people, about one third of the population of the town, according to Fr. Gibbons.

While building the school is the main project of the trip, it is far from all that the group aims to do. They will travel farther into the mountains to San José, a slightly larger village of about 400, to help in some smaller projects and, possibly, to organize a soccer tournament.

On Sunday, the group will travel with the Jesuit priests from Punta Gorda to visit some of the villages in the mountains to say Mass.

The three or four priests are responsible for about 40 villages, which each have Mass about once or twice a month. The long break between Masses makes them very different from ones in places that hold Mass every week.

"When you say Mass for the villages, it becomes kind of a sacramental, huge moment for the village. It'll be a Mass, but then there's many times baptisms, sometimes a marriage, sometimes there's even a funeral. It can be a lot of surprises, you never know till you're there," Fr. Gibbons said.

These Masses will be part of experiencing a different culture, one of the most important reasons many students applied for the trip, according to Miss Mertz.

However, some students have more specific reasons as well, such as Wieliczka. Among his reasons for going is a desire to make the experience of giving in Mission Week more hands-on.

"I know it's nice to go down there and like, relax on the beaches or whatever, but being able to help people out down there and see where the money from mission week goes [is very important]," Wieliczka said.

Despite the students' desire to go, the trip almost didn't happen. For the last three years various obstacles delayed the trip, and this year Fr. Gibbons had trouble finding a chaperone to go.

He finally found one in Miss Mertz and has credited "grace" as the reason he found her.

Now the mission trip has overcome the obstacles that had set it back, the group is busy preparing for their rapidly approaching departure.

"We've been meeting with the group of students that'll be going down there weekly during activity period for the past month or so to get everybody ready; we need to know the history and what to expect down there," Miss Mertz said.

What the students should expect are villagers who are hopeful despite their circumstances, according to Mr. Marvin Grilloit, who went on previous trips to Belize.

"It's a very poor country, a small country, but not a hopeless place. The people there are incredible. They're impressive. They're doing the best that they can," he said.

The work that this group of students will do may make the best the villagers can do a bit easier and give them more hope for the future.

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Belize City

- Group arrives here 3 p.m. on May 27.
- Leaves for KCI June 3, one week later

Placencia

- On Jun. 2, the last day of the trip, students will relax on the beach and reflect on the service and the overall experience

San José

- Mayan village of 400
- Group will do smaller projects such as hold a soccer tournament.

Punta Gorda

- Students will stay in a backpackers' hotel here for most of the trip.
- Capital of Toledo district, with a population of about 5,000.
- During the last trip to Belize, the main project was to help the St. Peter Claver Grade school in Punta Gorda

Sunday Wood

- Small village of 150 outside Punta Gorda
- Group will use money from Mission Week to build a school.

Fr. Gary Menara, SJ



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info compiled by John Otto