

Michigan Rotarian leads volunteers in giving depressed communities new life

Sr. Camille D'Arienzo | Feb. 18, 2014 Conversations with Sr. Camille

Rudi Edel

Age: 66

Profession: Rebuilder of communities

Lives in: Gaylord, Mich.

***Sr. Camille:* Rudi, our phone conversation went immediately into your description of your great passion: leading groups of volunteers to build schools in depressed areas of the Dominican Republic. By the time this conversation is published, you will have returned from another such enterprise.**

How many trips have you made?

Edel: This will be my 17th trip to the Dominican Republic building or repairing schools that also serve as medical clinics for medical personnel from the U.S. and Canada. On my first three trips, I was part of a team of Rotarians and other adults. In 2003, I was asked to represent the Gaylord Rotary Club as the world service chair for that club, so I now organize the trips and work on the projects.

Please describe your companions on this particular trip.

The upcoming Dominican Republic trip will include eight adults from 40 to 72 years old from the Gaylord and Manistee communities in Michigan, one college student from Utah, and 10 high schoolers from western Michigan.

Every trip includes students. Usually, trips have 18 to 25 people; this one will have a team of 19.

How did you get started in this important work?

Approximately 14 years ago, a hurricane hit the Dominican Republic and, through human error, a reservoir's control gates were opened. This caused a torrent of water to rush down the mountainside, leaving about 60,000 dead in a large, poor community. A small Mennonite school, medical clinic and guest house were in that devastation. A member of the Gaylord Rotary Club who knew the area suggested we form a team to help rebuild it.

When the rebuilding was done, we were asked to return to help expand the small school and also to construct a septic system and a building to house flush toilets for the children. At the request of the locals, we repeatedly returned to help build small schools and medical clinics in the barrios of El Rosario, El Penon, and San Juan. We also worked at a local orphanage and finished a medical/dental clinic in the community of El Cercado.

The enormity of your accomplishments is staggering!

We're not the only team doing this work. There are others from the U.S. and Canada that commit to accomplish work similar to what we undertake.

Please say something about the people for whom the schools are built.

Having traveled to 23 countries in my lifetime, I know people have different cultures, speak different languages, and practice different religions. Yet despite such differences, I find that all persons share the same longings. Each wants to live in peace, have access to medical treatment, get their children educated, and have reasonable employment so they can have a home and food on the table.

Dominican people are among the happiest and friendliest I've ever met. They appreciate having access to an education. Many children are eager to join the adults who work with us in the construction of their small school. They want to interact with our team during the day and to play games with us in the evening.

What are the schools like?

They're Christian schools run by Mennonite churches in remote barrios of the island. Some public education is available, but usually those schools are in cities -- too distant for barrio children to attend.

What pays for the schools you construct?

Financial donations come from the U.S. and Canada.

Are your wife and children involved in the work you provide?

Yes. My wife, Sandi, has joined me on six trips to the Dominican Republic and two to Indian reservations in our country. Dietary issues prevent her from accompanying me to Nicaragua. Sandi is also the primary caregiver for her 97-year-old mother, who lives with us.

Three of our four children have joined me on numerous trips both to the Dominican Republic and to Nicaragua. Although our oldest son plans to come along in the future, his priority now is his three small children.

You and your wife certainly share a unique relationship.

A funny story -- we'll be married 39 years this February, and I really thought I knew everything about my wife. However, on one of the Dominican construction trips, I learned she knows how to lay cement blocks.

How did you discover this talent?

Everyone, without exception, contributes by working at all construction jobs. You may be carrying cement blocks, mixing mortar, sifting sand, digging footings and then mixing and pouring cement, or you may be bending long steel rods into columns that will be submerged into the cement to reinforce the structure. If you have specific building skills -- like the ability to lay blocks, build doors or you know electrical code -- we ask that you use your skills in that specific area. With the exception of the electrical code, my wife and children have all of these skills and work in each area.

I do want to stress that even though we may be there to build a school, that's only 50 percent of our duties. The remaining 50 percent involves serving as ambassadors for our country and our church. Each day, we take time to interact with the locals, letting them know we are genuinely interested in them.

On the Native American trips, both my wife and I work at all the jobs except one: digging the 6-foot-deep holes

for the new outhouses. We leave that for the younger team members. The young men love to flex their muscles in front of the young women.

In Nicaragua, my children work in triage and also with me in the pharmacy.

Where do you get the funding for the travels, materials and workers?

Each team member is responsible for raising his/her own plane fare, room and board costs, and a specific amount of money (usually \$225 per trip per person) for construction materials for the Dominican Republic and Indian reservation trips. For the Nicaragua trips, team members are only responsible for the plane fare because the village residents feed us and provide sleeping space on their floors. Through a monthly collection at the cathedral, the Catholic diocese of Gaylord provides the funding for all purchases used during the medical trips. I encourage the students to write to relatives, explaining the trip's goals and how they believe this commitment will add to their growth.

As part of the Gaylord Rotary Club's commitment to world service, the organization assists any Rotarians engaged in these trips. Over time, the club has provided substantial seed money for projects, including providing water filters; sending 40 hearing aids for partially deaf children so they would be admitted to school; purchasing and installing a large generator at one of the school sites; and providing blood analysis equipment at the main clinic in the San Juan de la Maguana region.

This information and more than I can include here is phenomenal. What motivates you to keep doing this?

Well, you finally asked a question that is difficult to answer. I really do not think about this point. I just respond to serve using the talents I have.

Where and with whom did you grow up?

In 1947, I was born in Detroit and grew up on the east side. I lived with my parents, two sisters and a brother. I am the oldest child. I moved to the Gaylord area in northern Michigan in 1973 and bought land near the farm where my mother was born. I live in the country next to the Pigeon River State Forest (a 110,000-acre piece of state land) where our neighbors are elk, deer, black bear and an assortment of smaller creatures.

Where did you get your education?

I'm the product of both a public and Catholic education. I attended a Catholic grade school and a public high school and spent two years in a seminary. My undergraduate studies were at a Michigan public university and my graduate studies were at a Catholic university.

What was the profession from which you retired?

I was the court administrator for the circuit, district and probate court systems in three northern Michigan counties. I was also a magistrate in the district court division within those three counties. I retired June 30, 2009, at the age of 61, with 38 years of service.

Did you have role models, heroes or heroines that influenced your life choices?

I never really think about this. However, I do read about and admire the life and style of leadership of Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr. and Mother Teresa.

Do you have time to spend with your grandchildren?

You bet ya! From the marriage of two of our children, we have four grandchildren, ages 9, 7, 5 and 10 months. Each is a gift in our life that we can't get enough of.

Your daughter's involvement summons the old saw about the apple not falling far from the tree. What does she do?

My youngest daughter, Jessica, 32, recently obtained her doctorate in sociology. She is now the executive director of an organization that runs 25 different shelters for battered women and homeless people in southern Michigan and includes a centrally located small food pantry and used-clothing distribution program. She has made 12 trips to the Dominican Republic and one to Nicaragua. In 2013, Michigan State University asked her to work with three women from Tanzania to assist with the creation and organization of shelters and various programs in that country. Tanzanian women stayed in Michigan and worked with her for several weeks. In 2014, she will go to Tanzania and assist these women with the continuing implementation of their programs.

Do you have a favorite Scripture passage?

Two Scripture passages that are my favorites clearly teach that love becomes the common denominator in a relationship with our Creator. When the lawyer stood up and asked the teacher what he must do to gain eternal life (Luke 10:25-28), Jesus gave him two messages: One, love God; and two, love your neighbor.

When asked how to achieve salvation, Jesus replied: "You shall love the lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind: and your neighbor as yourself." When a man asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?", Jesus responded by telling the story of the wounded traveler whose plight was overlooked until a Samaritan stopped to care for him. Jesus helped the questioner to see that the person who served as neighbor was the one who showed compassion. Jesus said to him, "Then go and do the same."

How do you pray?

I have a difficult time with rote, repetitive prayer. I prefer a contemplative style of prayer. I slow down, sit in silence and quiet my mind to listen. I meditate on the prayer of St. Francis.

Where do you worship?

I am an active member of Holy Redeemer Parish in Vanderbilt, Mich. Our church is part of a four-church cluster in two counties, and our sacramental minister, the Rev. David Dupuis, is a retired priest (age 86) from the Lansing, Mich., area, truly a gifted man. He is compassionate, knows how to communicate to every age group and helps everyone grow spiritually. Being part of Holy Redeemer is being part of a rural Catholic family. The spirit of our church family is one of song during Mass, and we support our county's food pantry and pregnancy center.

What makes you happy?

This is an easy question! Joy comes from being with Sandi, whether under the same roof or she in her flower gardens or in the home spinning wool/knitting/sewing while I'm down at the barn or in the vegetable gardens. Just being with her brings joy. Joy is being with our four children and our four grandchildren (and our three granddogs). Our family always returns home for the holidays. Those times always bring happiness. Joy knows we are always welcome at our children's homes, even for days when we visit. In one way, our family may be somewhat unusual in the way we and our children can talk about current political or church affairs. Joy is

knowing Sandi and I are seen as equals and not just the parents from a different generation. Joy is family.

What would you change in our church?

A social change in our country started in the mid-1960s. People are now better educated. They no longer blindly follow; they challenge and ask, "Why?" Although equality has not yet been reached, people no longer enter into careers based on gender. Partially because of the Vietnam War, Watergate and the sex abuse cover-ups, trust must now be earned. The truth is never changing; however, doctrines are interpretations from Scripture study and prayer. Our church should re-examine doctrinal teachings through the lens of Jesus. It must find a way to communicate with the younger generation. It should stop being so concerned about small issues and look at the greater picture of serving the less fortunate. Spiritual growth should be reality-based.

Would you care to provide a specific concern?

If we look at the ban on female ordination or married clergy, we hear from our pastors that the church either believes Jesus did not want women being ordained because he only picked men as apostles or we hear the church cannot find definitive proof in Scripture that women can be ordained. Neither statement seems logical. Jesus lived in a male-dominated culture. Our church is not a fundamental religion. It doesn't follow the literal translation of Scripture. Why does it now need from Scripture a literal and definitive statement allowing a woman to be ordained? I believe it was in one of St. Paul's letters that there is no difference between a Jew and Gentile or between a man and a woman. As for married clergy, it existed in early centuries.

Anything else?

The church has to be consistent with the messages it sends. It's correct to be actively involved in the pro-life movement, but it's just as right to be active in the right-to-life movement before a prisoner is executed.

In certain matters, our church is exclusive; you must be a faithful Catholic to receive Eucharist. If you are divorced without an annulment, if you were married in a civil ceremony, then don't receive Eucharist. Jesus was always inclusive, always there for everyone.

What gifts do you want to pass on to others?

The importance of loving, which means accepting others where they are on life's journey, and being compassionate and forgiving.

Is there anything you would like to add to this conversation?

Yes, three points:

First, our trips are coordinated through three different programs/church structures. I work through the Mennonite-based Helping Hands Unlimited out of Albany, Ind., to coordinate the trips to the Dominican Republic. I work through joint coordination between the Catholic dioceses of Gaylord and Matagalpa for the medical trips to Nicaragua and through a nonprofit organization called RE-MEMBER for the Native American trips, an organization started by two Congregational ministers over 15 years ago.

Second, Dominican Republic trips are limited to 35 people and Nicaragua trips to 14, primarily medical people, because we live in remote villages in the mountains where sleeping space and food are limited. The Native American reservation trips, limited to 15 to 20 people, are open to anyone 13 years old and up. Specific religious affiliation isn't necessary. The requirements are: a desire to serve and the ability to work long hours and live in sparse accommodations.

Third, I have three trips planned to the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation for 2014. If anyone is interested in joining us Aug. 8-16 or Sept. 12-20, we'd welcome their inclusion. These two trips combine work and cultural immersion into the Oglala Lakota culture and spirituality. They can contact me for details by emailing rudi@treespiritfarms.com [1].

[Mercy Sr. Camille D'Arienzo, broadcaster and author, narrates *Stories of Forgiveness*, a book about people whose experiences have caused them to consider the possibilities of extending or accepting forgiveness. The audiobook, renamed *Forgiveness: Stories of Redemption*, [is available](#) [2] from Now You Know Media.]

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