

The Havens award is given annually to a Lafayette student seeking a non-traditional summer experience, and funded this trip. Below is a thank-you letter describing the experience. First initials (and limited personal info) are used in this edition to protect privacy.

FROM: W. "Ben" Towne
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July 27, 2008

Dear The Havens Family and Academic Awards Committee,

I am writing today to thank you very much for this year's Jeffrey B. Havens award and the opportunities it allowed for an awesome 10-day mission trip in the Dominican Republic (DR).

The trip took place July 9-18, 2008 and was organized by the Foundation For Peace. I travelled as part of a mission group from College Hill Presbyterian Church, which is only five blocks from campus and which can claim several Lafayette faculty, staff, administrators, and students (including myself) as active participants. One of our strongest supporters from outside this year's mission group was actually M. Reiter, a longtime physics lab instructor at Lafayette. Her son and my friend Z., a Lafayette alum from Mathematics and Computer Science '07, took time off of his new job at Google to join us on the trip even though it immediately preceded his brother's wedding. This trip provided opportunities to learn from a recent graduate with strong character and valuable experience in a way that no Career Services networking session ever would. Lafayette's full support for this project was quite appreciated,

We were also joined on the trip by a small group from a sister church Phillipsburg and a larger group from Project 79, an alternative education program at a high school in South Jersey. Among our group we had engineers, teachers, pastors, managers, musicians, students, and more. Two to three Foundation For Peace (FFP) missionaries worked with our group, and a whole crew of Dominicans helped out with cooking, transportation, logistics, and physically completing the work we were down there to do.

FFP's approach to mission is driven primarily by the community, contrasting the paternalistic style of some other mission organizations. Their motto and purpose focuses on working "mano a mano," or "hand in hand." I could see a lot of conceptual links between this and the grant-winning Community-Oriented Design and Evaluation Procedure for Sustainable Infrastructure & Development (CODE-PSID), first created here at Lafayette [in Engineering Policy 480], tested in the work of Engineers Without Borders, and extended in the Economic Empowerment and Global Learning Project research group that I'm now a part of. I could also see other links between this trip and my current research on social structures (my research focuses primarily on the impact of technology; this was a base case). It was quite refreshing for me to get back to a "Localized" community, with structures like the family that first prompted my work.

Most of our work in the DR focused on physical construction of the foundation and supporting walls for a primary school. In this place, as elsewhere, building capacity through education is a critical first step to building peace – especially in an area where basic education and literacy are valuable gems not to be taken for granted. On the first day, we finished digging out the trenches and holes for the foundation, laid rebar, and began pouring concrete (through a lot of "bucket lines!"). As work continued, we finished the foundation, filled in the trenches, worked on leveling the large earth mound in the center, and built walls of cinderblock and mortar, reinforced by concrete pillars.

A few days' mission was set aside from the physical construction project. On one day, we hosted a medical clinic with a few doctors from Santo Domingo (the capital city), guiding and helping families for whom this would be the only medical attention they'd receive in a year or more. Through donations raised prior to the trip, we were able to donate over 1,000 toothbrushes along with toothpaste, soap, and other "essentials" as part of hygiene kits that would improve health conditions through the rest of the year. On this day, I was a pharmacist preparing and filling the various medications that the doctors prescribed.

The day after the medical clinic, we ran VBS (Vacation Bible School) programs as a means of interactive education with the children. Our morning was spent in La Javilla de la Cruz, where we also spent the rest of the week. For the afternoon we traveled to a more rural community called Zumbón ("zim-bone"), where the group had worked last year. In both locations, the kids got very excited about the skit and craft. I also enjoyed seeing Zumbón and understand the transformative experience reported by last year's group, reflected in the faces of both the returners and the local community members. After VBS in Zumbón, our group had a bit of less structured time to enjoy fellowship and games with the Zumbón residents, and the kids brought balls and frisbees to play with. We noticed that some of the frisbees were Lafayette Aflicktion (Ultimate Frisbee team) discs that had been donated the prior year.

It is important when working in any area to understand its history and major economic drivers. Several months prior to the trip, our mission group hosted a documentary film screening at Lafayette – "The Price of Sugar," examining the agricultural and slave-labor aspects of the DR's inland economy. One evening at the end of our first week, we met with community leaders to hear the hard facts and statistics about the economic, education, health, and social conditions where we were working. In the second week of the trip, we also took one day to see a historical part of the capital city – including the area where Columbus first landed and the oldest cathedral in the Americas. That afternoon, we visited the markets and the beach – areas which fuel the large tourism sector of the national economy. In the evening, we joined the second of our full-time missionaries to hear another life story and the background of those leading and guiding us.

After construction on the final day, we also had some time to play with the La Javilla kids who had been working with us in the bucket lines all week. We brought various balls, jump ropes, and a few frisbees to leave with the large crowd (c/o the church), and went to an empty lot to teach and play. The streets and this lot are the only recreational areas the kids have. Once a YEAR, if they're lucky, they might get a church-sponsored field trip to a park (like the Quad) or a pool. Most of the people who live in this community have never seen the ocean, despite the fact that the Caribbean is only an hour and a half away by car. Offering opportunities for constructive use of kids' energy and talent is important in building a brighter economic future as well as in overcoming issues of drugs and violence that plague the community. Our construction of a school building aims at those goals for the long term, our "sports clinic" and VBS aims at them in the short term, and the medical clinic fills in for the medium-term.

By the end of our week, the foundation and vertical walls were completed (except for the top of window and door frames). For the final night, the Dominicans decorated the interior with balloons and streamers, strung a few hanging lights, and hosted us in a final worship together. It was a very emotional service for both the Dominicans and the Americans as we both said goodbye to new friends who we had worked with all week, connecting across language and culture.



For a very brief ten days, we lived and worked in an environment very different than what we are used to in our luxurious American standards of living. We experienced wonderful hospitality and received gifts from those who had far less than what most of us might consider minimum standards to reserve before giving. For ten days, the Dominican community saw somebody else assign value and effort to who they are and what they're trying to accomplish, and labor hand in hand with them to make an investment in their future. After those ten days, friends and family of mission volunteers received and heard from those who had gone, seen, and expanded their horizons. Each of us gained a new and valuable experience: exposure to a new community and a different way of life, a re-scaling of how we assess our own resources and ability to help others, and a new appreciation for physical labor regardless of occupational background.

The Foundation For Peace works in impoverished communities to build capacity for constructive use of local abilities, building peace through health and education. It also builds peace through its volunteers, by exposing them to an intense experience and atypical perspective. Among those who have basic resources and amenities, peace is primarily built by opening minds to allow consideration of perspective beyond one's own, which can be accomplished by bringing people together in experiences like this one. Just after the trip, group leader M. Kim-Kort reflected our learned lesson that "peace isn't always contingent on situations and circumstances but rather on the response and perspective of the people involved in it all."

Thank you very much for your support of this valuable endeavor. If you wish to see more in images from this trip, I invite you to visit the enhanced slideshow available online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=15uhcIShuFM>. I also invite you to a brown-bag presentation in Acopian Engineering Center, to be held at your earliest convenience after the start of the fall semester. Thank you again!

Grace and peace,

W. Ben Towne