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TIMES LEADER

### Labor of love for kids

Volunteers build up quality of life for Honduran children

By ALAN K. STOUT

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WILKES-BARRE - Jim Davenport could spend his vacation at the shore, and Matt Petlock could do some camping. Jim Weaver could chill out around the house, and John Prokopchak could easily find plenty of ways to get some rest and relaxation.

These men, however, and about 20 other area volunteers, have decided to spend a week pounding nails and hauling lumber in Honduras, where they'll help make much-needed improvements to the country's orphanages.

"Operation Honduras," as the group calls itself, began seven years ago with just five people and has continued to grow each year. While members once visited Honduras just once a year to provide such services, they now go three times, sometimes with 25 to 30 volunteers, all of whom reside in Northeastern Pennsylvania.

Davenport, 40, of Dunmore, says most volunteers spend their time doing hard construction.

"The joy of our giving is our own labor," says Davenport, adding that Prokopchak and Weaver each go a week earlier than the rest of the group to make sure all the materials are in place and concrete bases are laid. Volunteers from Honduras also help the group find worthy projects, such as orphanages and children's centers and help provide transportation.

This group's next visit to Honduras is set for Feb. 12. While there, the group will complete construction work on a school at an orphanage as well as finish up work on a special residential facility for ill children, most of whom are HIV positive. Two area residents, Dr. Steve and Beverly Solfanelli, R.N., also will offer free oral surgery. Toni Hill, Rose Ann Gaetano and Pat Sulla will perform hearing exams, and



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hearing aids, paid for by "OH" fund-raisers, will be provided.

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"With some of the kids, the only hugs they ever get are what we give them," says Weaver, 51, of the Mountain Top area. "And if you saw the look on the kids' faces when they hear their mom's voice for the first time, when they get their hearing aids ..."

Petlock, 39, also of the Mountain Top area, says his visits to Honduras have shown him how Americans take simple things such as running water for granted. Like the others in the group, he says he's sometimes shocked at the deplorable conditions of children's facilities in the country and is committed to doing something about it.

Davenport agrees. The former member of the Peace Corps says need is why the group chooses to help the children of Honduras. A 1996 visit to the country allowed him to see firsthand the poor conditions of the country's orphanages. Because he had friends skilled in masonry, construction and carpentry - all of whom might be willing to help - he decided to get involved. After talking about the situation over a card game, the group formed "OH."

"You go down once, and that's all it takes," says Prokopchak, 46, of Kingston Township. "And after so many years now, you see the kids grow. It's amazing. The kids really appreciate what they have and what they get, and they'll help you work."

Davenport says others in the community also have been inspired by the work done by "OH" members. Matt Doggett, a third-grader from Dallas, recently read a newspaper article about the group and decided that for his own birthday, rather than ask for gifts for himself, he'd ask for gift cards so the group could buy medicines for the children of Honduras. More than \$300 was raised.

Davenport says those who make the trip to Honduras can expect to work in scorching heat and put in some long days. Still, he says the group enjoys its evenings and finds some time for fun and a little socializing. Cost for a trip is about \$1,100, which covers airfare, hotel accommodations, daily expenses and some pocket money. There are no administrative fees for volunteers.

"It's rewarding, it's fun, and you have the chance to make a big difference in the quality of a child's life," Davenport says. "The kids are the rewards."

#### **HOW TO HELP**

- Those interested in helping Operation Honduras can contact Jim Davenport at 970-0650. There is always a need for used hearing aids and for various medications for both adults and children. The group also needs equipment to help with PC-based telecommunications systems.

- To help alleviate the cost of the volunteers' transportation, send donations to: St. Mary's/St. Joseph's Church, 134 S. Washington St., Wilkes-Barre, Pa. 18703. Simply memo your check "Operation Honduras Airfare Fund."
- To contribute to the building costs of special projects in Honduras, send donations to: Westminster Church, 2 Lockhart St., Wilkes-Barre, Pa. 18703. Simply memo your check "Operation Honduras Building Material Fund."

#### TIMES LEADER STAFF PHOTOS/FRED ADAMS

Jim Davenport, Jim Weaver, Matthew Petlock and John Prokopchak meet to discuss their upcoming 'Operation Honduras' trip. The area volunteer group is dedicated to improving the quality of life of children in Honduras.

Matt Petlock looks through a photo album of some of 'Operation Honduras' previous visits to the country. The group is planning another weeklong trip on Feb. 12.

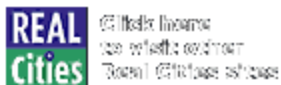
Matt Doggett, a third-grader from Dallas, recently decided to forgo birthday presents for himself and instead collect donations for the children of Honduras. Shown is a gift box Doggett presented to the 'Operation Honduras' group.

#### PHOTO COURTESY OPERATION HONDURAS

Here's a group of 'Operation Honduras' members during one of their most recent visits to the country. The volunteer outfit spends much of its time building schools, shelters and medical facilities for orphaned and underprivileged children.



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