



Courtesy photo by JOHN MULQUEEN

Gardner High School students Jenna Lemieux, Aurora Cooper, Kate Rahaim, Kelly McKeogh and Lauren Dembek hold a sign at the site where Dr. John and Paula Mulqueen's Forward in Health foundation plans to build a health clinic in Les Cayes, Haiti during a trip in April. The students, through their involvement in the high school's Project Haiti club, raised funds to sponsor the clinic's waiting room, to be called the "Wildcat Waiting Room." Also pictured is Sonita Dorcena of Haiti, who accompanied the group.

A land of extremes

BY DANIEL KITTREDGE
NEWS STAFF WRITER

GARDNER — For the five Gardner High School students that went to Haiti in April through Dr. John Mulqueen's Forward in Health foundation — as well as for chaperone Cindy Taddeo, a speech pathologist with the city's schools — the trip was a first.

The experience was a lasting one, a chance to meet the people of a distant country and see how efforts back home in the Chair City have had a direct and positive effect on their lives. Yet among the most rewarding aspects of the voyage was another first they got to share with some of Haiti's youngest and least privileged residents.

"They kind of just cling to you," said Gardner high graduate Lauren Dembek of

the 12 children — all from a local orphanage — that made their first ever visit to the beach with the group of Gardnerites.

There was also a visit to a nursing home, where Lauren and fellow student Kelly McKeogh got a chance to spend time with older residents of the Les Cayes region of Haiti. The girls brought one woman a hat, and in response received hugs and kisses.

"She was so happy," recalled Lauren.

The trip — also attended by students Jenna Lemieux, Aurora Cooper, Kate Rahaim, chaperone Wes Daniels and Paula Mulqueen — was the latest through which high school students involved in the effort started by the Mulqueens traveled to an impoverished area of Haiti without access to health care.

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On trip, students cooked Haitian-style meal for nursing home residents

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"It was a once-in-a-lifetime kind of thing," said Ms. Taddeo, recalling the beauty and poverty of the region. "The scenery and everything is so beautiful ... it's two extremes."

This trip, unlike some focused on offering clinics and medical assistance to residents of the Les Cayes region, was centered around transporting supplies to the area. Forward in Health is currently working to construct a health clinic to provide medical attention for those living in the region.

During the trip, said Ms. Taddeo, the students had a variety of experiences. During a visit to the nursing home — which is sponsored by a church in Massachusetts — they cooked a full Haitian-style meal for the residents, which required a visit to the market and a crash course in local cuisine.

"That was quite an experience," she said. The group helped paint rooms in a

two-story schoolhouse recently built by Hope For Haiti, a Florida-based nonprofit dedicated to providing educational assistance and opportunities for the nation's children, and spent one day sitting in on English and mathematics classes. While language was something of a barrier — some of the Gardner students knew a bit of French, while some of the Haitian students spoke Creole — the visit proved a success.

"They got through it," she said with a laugh.

The trip had been in doubt during the days leading up to the group's scheduled departure, with riots having broken out at the time. The journey went on as scheduled, said Ms. Taddeo, and the group "always felt safe" thanks to the presence of a Haitian guide who works with Forward in Health.

"I think they saw a lot," said Ms. Taddeo of the Gardner students. "I think they had a really good experience." Lauren agreed with that assessment,

"The scenery and everything is so beautiful ... it's two extremes."

— Cindy Taddeo

saying she plans to visit Haiti again sometime soon. She is set to attend Elms College in the fall, but plans to stay involved with Forward in Health and similar groups at her new school.

"Seeing the people, seeing them smile ... I just got a good feeling from it," she said.

Dr. Mulqueen said bringing high school students to Haiti — with another trip set to leave July 29 — is a mutually beneficial arrangement.

"Much of the vitality of Forward in Health comes from our relationship with

high school and college students," he said. "From the beginning, Forward in Health has welcomed students 16 years of age and over to accompany us on medical and non-medical cultural exchange trips. The energy, maturity, and empathy exhibited by the students has provided inspiration to all of us."

Many of the students, he said, return from their trip "as young adults with a new view on priorities and a focus on their future." Many want to return, he said, and some are inspired to pursue careers in fields such as nursing and journalism. We are proud that most students want to return to Haiti with Forward in Health. In addition, the trips to Haiti have inspired careers in nursing and journalism.

Dr. Mulqueen also lauded the high school's Project Haiti club, through which students become involved with the effort. Under the guidance of history teacher and club adviser John Gardella, the students have a chance to enrich

their global perspective while making tangible contributions to the well-being of others.

The latest example of those contributions is the "Wildcat Waiting Room," a part of the new clinic in Les Cayes that the Project Haiti students raised funds to sponsor. During April's trip, the students visited the site of the new facility and had an opportunity to meet with the residents who will one day utilize it.

"I think it will help out a lot," said Lauren, noting that Project Haiti raised the funds through a teacher talent show and other events.

Having had doubts about the trip at first, Ms. Taddeo said she would "definitely do it again." For both the students and the people of Les Cayes, Haiti, she said, such experiences are highly positive.

"The people are very accepting, and want to help," she said. "It puts it all in perspective, I guess."

dkittredge@thegardnernews.com