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Grafton sisters Kelly and Katie Tunder go to the Dominican Republic for 10 days every year on a mission to improve lives in a village where many houses are thatched huts without running water

For the past six years, sisters Kelly and Katie Tunder of Grafton have spent 10 days during May in Los Toros, Dominican Republic, living with families and helping to improve living conditions.

Katie, 25, and Kelly, 24, were students at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse when they and other young college students, accompanied by Deacon Don Kabara of St. Joseph's Catholic Parish in Grafton, embarked on the parish's first Young Adult Mission Experience to the small village where many people live in thatched huts with dirt floors and no running water.

This is the 25th year Kabara has led volunteers to the country to develop solidarity with what is now a sister community, but it was mostly adults until the young adult group formed in 2006.

The mission experiences convinced Kelly to go into the medical field. She is a second year osteopathic medical student at Lincoln Memorial University in Harrogate, Tenn., and wants to put her knowledge into practice in Los Toros.

Katie, who works for FIS in Brown Deer, a banking software and technology company, brought her communication skills to her adopted country.

Los Toros is their second home, a place they envision themselves visiting and working for many years to come. The Grafton High School graduates are fluent in Spanish.

When they entered the village for the first time six years ago, both said they were overwhelmed by culture shock. By the end of the trip, they had taught 90 children how to use toothbrushes and toothpaste and taught English to a handful of students, and they couldn't wait to go back the next year.

"It's one of those mission trips you don't do just once," Katie said. "Eighty to 90% of it is based on relationships."

"If you continue to come, they respect you more and give you their trust," Kelly added.

This May, more than 900 children attended dental hygiene clinics run with the help of 15 young Dominicans, and 200 children attended English classes in Los Toros and neighboring

Sajanoa and Las Guanabanas.

The sisters live with families on opposite ends of the village in very different situations.

Katie lives in a two-room thatched hut with about a dozen people. Her Dominican parents are in their 70s.

“Every year who is living in the house changes. There are a lot of broken families, with one parent gone, but you never see a child abandoned or hungry. An aunt or uncle always takes them in,” Katie said.

“I had my own bed, but usually two to three people were sleeping on the floor next to me.”

Kelly lives in a palace by comparison with her adopted mother Nuris, sister Yordanka, who is called YoYo, cousin Emerson and grandmother Senorita.

Her family’s home has a concrete floor and indoor plumbing, and she has her own bedroom.

Nuris is head of the water sanitation program in the community and highly respected. For the last two years, she’s worked in Santo Domingo, the nation’s capital, coming home two to three times a week.

Yordanka, who was 12 when Kelly met her, is now 18 and studying medicine at the university. She is on a scholarship program provided by St. Joe’s.

Kelly brought her stethoscope and reflex hammer with her and taught Yordanka how to use them.

“I taught her how to listen to my heart and lungs and do my reflexes,” Kelly said. “It was great to see her excitement. Now, every time I listen to a heart and lungs and do reflexes, I think of this experience.”

Every day the sisters and their families ate the same meal for lunch — rice, beans and chicken. Plantains and mangos were ripe so there were plenty of those, also.

Electricity is available two or three hours every day, but there is no refrigeration so they eat everything that is prepared.

“If they slaughter a cow, they ring a bell for everyone to come. Every piece of the cow is used,” Kelly said.

Kelly worked in the medical and prenatal clinics until she got sick after eating something prepared with tainted water. Her sister took care of her.

Getting clean water for people to drink is a priority for St. Joe’s and the Los Toros community. Community members can apply for loans from the Los Toros Foundation to install a water filter.

The money they pay back to the foundation is loaned to other families.

All Los Toros projects are determined by the community in conjunction with St. Joe's, which provides financial backing and volunteers to teach the Dominicans.

Over the years, they have worked together to build schools, clinics, a library and mission house. St. Joe's also funds scholarship programs.

Katie termed the word companeroship to describe the joint efforts between the two cultures.

"This was the most successful trip to date (for the young adult mission)," Katie said. "Not only was our group filled with incredibly talented and compassionate Americans, but our group tripled the moment we arrived in the community. It is incredible to see how involved the youth and young adults of Los Toros have become over the years.

"They're our brothers and sisters in faith, our family over there."

That enthusiasm spread to the neighboring communities of Sajanoa and Las Guanabanas, where Los Toros young people took the dental program and English classes. Before, the communities rarely interacted, Katie said, but since the Americans are willing to help them, they decided to help their neighbors.

Katie is especially pleased to see so many young Dominicans learning English.

"Tourism is big in the Dominican Republic. If these kids can learn English, it opens up doors for them to work in tourism," she said.

Everyone in their mission group tries to step out of their lives back home when they are in Los Toros, Katie said. That's important now that there are computers and the Internet in the village that allows them to stay connected to the USA.

Image Information: Los Toros family (from left) cousin Paula, sister Yordanka and grandmother Senorita posed with Kelly and Katie Tunder.