Offering VBS In The Caribbean

Non-Profit Group Makes First Trip To The Islands

By Claudia Schweb

Just as audiences in Lexington were sitting down with their popcorn to view “The Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s Chest” at the State Theater this summer, a group of Rockbridge area people were immersed in life near some of the actual film sites on a mission trip/service vacation in St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

Lexington resident Susan Dittman was the organizer of the trip. She is also the visionary behind the newly formed Caribbean Encounters Inc., a non-profit corporation. This was the group’s first trip.

“Some people think of the Caribbean as being a resort area but there’s a lot of poverty and need there,” she said. “Scott (Dittman’s husband) and I met in the Peace

ABOVE is the harbor of Kingstown, capital city of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, an archipelago country comprising 32 islands in the eastern Caribbean. As a volcanic island of only 133 square miles, St. Vincent’s dramatic hills are everywhere, even within the city limits. Ninety percent of the country’s 110,000 people live in St. Vincent. At Left, Everyday but Sunday is market day in Kingstown, but especially Saturday, when hundreds of tables, stalls, tents and umbrellas cover a four-block area, both inside and outside, between Bay Street and Back Street. (Scott Dittman photos)
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—Susan Ditman

now. Volunteering was a good experience for me and I'd hope to lead others in a similar type situation."

The group of 10 left July 13 and spent 12 days teaching 225 children at Kingstown Evangelical Church in St. Vincent's capital city of Kingstown. St. Vincent lies due west of Barbados and not far from the northeastern coast of Venezuela.

The impetus to teach at the Kingstown church came while the Dittrims were on a 2005 visit to St. Vincent, which is both a Christian and English-speaking island. During the visit, they were told that no one had offered to teach vacation Bible school at the church, giving Dittrman, who has a master's degree in religious education and has taught Bible school both in Lexington and Ohio, the inspiration to organize the trip.

"It was done out of Christian faith," she explained of the trip. "We are not a Christian organization but we may be involved with churches, as we were on this trip, or with government or other organizations, as we may be in the future.

"On this trip, the initial and overall goal was simply to encourage the members of Kingstown Evangelical Church by helping them to offer their vacation Bible school, which was an outreach program, to the children in their community," explained Dittrman. "With the economy being such a problem in St. Vincent, the church members were finding it more difficult to continue the program they had done in the past and work at their jobs.

"The goal of the VBS centered around the curriculm theme 'Go Global with Jesus' and included knowing the gospel message and understanding why and how Christians should share that message," she said.

Besides teaching at the Kingstown church, group members also organized evening recreational activities for children in one of the poor neighborhoods known as Rose Place and collected by group member Sharon Humphreys. Humphreys, who is a second grade teacher at Kling Elementary School, is working toward an endorsement in library media and volunteered to head up the project.

Humphreys also trained a girl to be librarian for the Kingstown church, which received 1,000 of the books.

"At first, I thought I wasn't going to get much but the

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RUTH KITCHEN hands out stickers while inviting a Rose Place boy to Vacation Bible school. The team had handed out all of their stickers and flyers within an hour. (Sharon Humphreys photo)

TEACHING Bible school lessons to middle school students are Griffin Dittrman (left) and Kehl Achieles. The facilities where they taught - homes, a church and a school - are very simple and typically open air. (Sharon Humphreys photo)

CLAY DITTMAN plays a game of keep-away with three of his new friends (from left) Kesha, Juanita and Precious, at the all-concrete Rose Park playground, located in one of the poorest neighborhoods of Kingstown. The team brought with them volleyball nets, four types of balls and flying discs. Just outside the gate to the left
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books just kept coming and coming," she said. "My whole living room and dining room were just full of these books. We shipped something like 1,200 pounds of books."

Besides the Dittmans and Humphreys, the other adults who went were Amy Haylette, a retired Rockbridge County math teacher, and Ruth Kitchen, a special education teacher at Waddeell Elementary School. The younger members of the group included RCIS seniors Kailein Kitchen and Clay Dittman; 19-year-old Ally Datz, a Lynchburg College sophomore; Griffin Dittman, a University of Virginia senior and volleyball coach at the Miller School near Charlottesville; and Kelly Achilles, a Texas Christian University graduate who is a manager-in-training for a Charlottesville restaurant.

"One thing about our group was we were so varied with different ages, different denominations, different backgrounds and different expectations about what was going to happen," said Haylette, who was a 1999 Peace Corps volunteer in South Africa. "I was expecting to be a helper in a classroom helping another teacher like I had done in the Peace Corps whereas in St. Vincent, we were the teachers."

Haylette taught 14 preschool children along with Kailein Kitchen and found it to be both challenging and rewarding.

"The preschoolers were a very noisy group," she noted. "It took us two days to get them to understand they should be quiet during storytime but once they understood, they did really well."

The children were divided into four groups by age with two or three people assigned to each age group.

Ruth Kitchen, Susin and Clay Dittman taught the 6- through 9-year-olds, which was the largest group at 65.

"The change for me was the numbers," said Kitchen. "We found out it's not unusual in St. Vincent to have anywhere from 35 to 50 in a class and they had open-air classes which made the acoustics difficult.

"Conditions were very different than those here and it made us reach a little deeper in order to teach," she noted. "The kids were used to much stricter, firmer discipline than we're even allowed to use in the schools here."

Despite the challenging conditions, Kitchen said it was a very positive experience for her.

"They came every day with smiles on their faces and left every day with smiles," she said about the children. "They were there the next day regardless of the challenges we had and were happy to see us."

For both Kitchen and Scott Dittman, one of the highlights of their teaching experiences was doing crafts with their groups.

Scott Dittman said that he and Ally Datz, his teaching partner for the 33 teenagers, had discussed the teaching tactics they might use before arriving in St. Vincent. Datz, as a teen herself, did not think they needed to include crafts to teach Bible lessons, he said.

"It turned out we were wrong about the crafts because they took pride in it," he said. "They all wanted to go back into their neighborhood with something they'd made. They had no possessions of their own and this was something they had." 

Scott Dittman said that despite the hurdles with handling the rowdy teenagers, there were many gratifying instances.

"Teenagers were hard kids," he noted. "The first day a guy named Leon came in with his hat down over the corner of his eyes and I doubt I could have made the connection we made if it hadn't been for the skit we did about Noah, Leon, who played Noah, had an attitude but he liked being on stage and he liked being able to play this role."

Skits were memorable for other members of the group.

"We talked about missionaries like Paul and Silas who had been in prison," Haylette said. "We made paper chains and then we chained all the children together.

"After an earthquake came, the children broke out of their chains but even though they were such a noisy group, I remember they stayed right there and spread the Gospel to each other the way Paul and Silas had done," said Haylette.

Ruth Kitchen's favorite memory involves music.

She remembers when Susan Dittman and she were teaching a lesson on faith to their primary school group. Kitchen led the children in the song "Kumbaya."

"We had the largest group and we had them in the sanctuary without chairs for them to sit on," she remembered. "Even though they were usually undisciplined, that last day, we had their undivided attention. They even led the congregation on the following Sunday singing the African song with the American sign language we had taught them. It was neat having the kids teaching the adults."

The fact that many of the children that came to the VBS program were poor was quite evident right from the start.

"We went out before school started and canvassed Rose Place (the area from which many of the students came) and one mother asked if there would be food offered," remembers Susan Dittman.

"I'd been told snack would be very important which wouldn't necessarily be the case for a vacation Bible school in most places in the United States."

Kingstown has a population of about 50,000 and Rose Place was known as "Bottom Town," the poor area down near the water where they led the recreational activities in the evenings.

"We'd walk through downtown Kingstown and we'd see the teenagers we were teaching," remembered Scott Dittman. "They'd say '4 o'clock?' which was the time we'd agreed to play volleyball and we'd answer 'yes, we'll be there.' It's like a small-town environment."

The fact that St. Vincent is English-speaking lulled some of the group members into thinking that communication would be relatively easy. The native, however, also speak with a French patois and a Caribbean dialect which made many conversations difficult.

Despite the difficulties, group members agreed that language was not a barrier.

"The thing it taught me is it's as much a non-verbal experience as verbal," said Scott Dittman. "My big arm motions and enthusiasm and trying to make it real for them in their neighborhood is more important."

"It was an eye-opening experience for some of the younger group members and it was a heart-opening experience for me," he said.

Future plans include trips for homeschool, church or student groups to work on building projects and either recreational or educational activities with children, Susan Dittman said. Trips will be mainly in the summer or when students or adults are available, she added.

Anyone interested in more information about Caribbean Encounters can call Susan Dittman at 463-3488 or sdittman@adelphia.net.