

## **Anxious to touch lives, Amber Jones heads to the Dominican Republic**



July 29, 2008 – As other students eased into the summer break, Amber Jones prepared to leave the country.

### **BSW student Amber Jones**

Jones, who will be a senior in the Indiana University School of Social Work's BSW program this fall, had a desire to go places and touch peoples lives.

She recalled a presentation by a visitor to one of her BSW classes who urged students to get involved, to volunteer. Jones decided to see what opportunities were available, particularly in the area of community development.

First she contacted International Student Volunteers and from there was connected with a program called Crossroads and decided to become a volunteer in the Dominican Republic.

By the middle of May, Jones left her home in Greenfield and was headed for the Caribbean to become a volunteer and to earn credits towards her degree by turning the experience into an independent study project.

"I had no idea what the place would look like," said Jones, who returned from the Dominican Republic last month. But she figured the Christian-based Crossroads group would allow her to satisfy some of her desires to touch people's lives.

Her group started off with grand plans of helping to build homes

in the morning and then work with children in the afternoons. But the reality of the heat in the Caribbean made some of their plans impractical.

What she and others in her group began doing was visiting different villages daily to help out in various ways.

Many of the people she worked with were Haitians who had found it necessary to leave their homeland and take up life as best as they could in the Dominican Republic.

Poor doesn't begin to describe the lives of the people Jones came across. One of the places they stopped at was a landfill, where people lived and worked. Their homes were made of cast-off materials and they collected things to sell, like bottles. They also looked for food that was still safe to eat.

"They lived off of the trash," Jones said. The villagers, for example, knew which trash trucks came from resort areas, she noted. As bad as it looked to her, Jones knew that it was a step-up from the conditions they left behind in Haiti.

At places like the landfill, they handed out donation bags containing things like work gloves, towels, wash clothes and hygienic products. At other villages they would deliver bread, boiled eggs and milk to children. "We learned a lot just by walking through the villages," Jones said.

The mission of Crossroads wasn't just to feed people, but help the villagers figure out ways to support themselves, she noted. She saw one village that had started a co-op with the aid of Crossroads, selling things like jewelry.

Crossroads did help villagers construct homes as they didn't have the means or materials to handle the job. Their job was to help the construction workers, Jones said. She even learned to work with rebar, or steel bars, used in construction.

They worked with children too, but often the lessons plans her group would come up with went out the window when they arrived in a village. The children were delighted to see them and soon they would be holding babies, while others climbed on their shoulders. As an introduction, they would start off signing songs with the village children.

Older children were eager to practice their English with the visitors and were ready to devour any help the volunteers could give them in areas like math. The village children did have access to schools, but it was clear the schools had few resources of any kind. Jones and others would devise long-division problems and other math problems for them to work on. "They were smart and wanted to learn," Jones said.

While language was a barrier, she credited one of her teachers, James Brown, an associate faculty member, with giving her the tools to deal with the situation. It wasn't so much how to do things, but how to react, how best to handle people's anxiety and instigate good energy, she said.

His advice on dealing with group dynamics proved invaluable, too, as Jones worked with other volunteers who came from different backgrounds. It gave her a sense of confidence to help lead the group's efforts and others would ask, "What do we do now Amber," she recalled.

In terms of the villagers, she learned to keep her eyes and ears open and look for expressions that are universal in any language. "It was a great way to learn body language," she added.

And while she had heard the expression before, Jones came to realize that a smile is indeed worth a thousand words.

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