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# An Act of Charity in Rochester

by

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*The authors are both members of the Rochester Guild.*

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The Rochester Guild has always committed itself to upholding the principles of the Catholic Church as related to the events and practice of medicine. Central to that mission is the principle of charity and a sense of community not limited to our own immediate environs. Some years ago, one of our members, Dr. Carlo De Santis, contacted the Living Waters Community in Trinidad in an effort to begin a Third World Medical Outreach program. Ophthalmic equipment sufficient to equip an eye clinic was shipped there to serve the needs of the poor. Since then, the Guild has become more deeply involved in this medical outreach program and the commitment has both grown and shifted at a rate both exasperating and exhilarating. This year has seen the culmination of many efforts, bringing the Guild to the verge of even greater accomplishments.

As I reflect on what is necessary to make a medical outreach program possible, I find the elements of vision, dedication, organization, publicity, community support, access to resources and transportation all essential. Our own particular vision first arose from just one member's desire to serve those in need. Dr. DeSantis' ability to communicate the energy of his vision to other physicians helped guarantee the project's success, even when his own health failed. This list of requirements may seem intimidating at first, but an energetic vision ensures a successful conclusion to the process.

Dedication is critical to the process of building a medical outreach program as the process can be laborious. Each component, from identifying a specific community or hospital in need, to the actual collecting, storing and sorting of material is necessarily time consuming.

The Guild received irreplaceable support in carrying out these tasks from Dick Lombard, a Deacon in our Diocese. By traveling to Trinidad he has been able to establish a personal relationship with the members of the Living Waters Community. As a result, we have a clearer understanding of their needs and abilities. Their own example of charity and devotion to the orphaned children, the victims of drug abuse and the underserved poor inspires our own efforts to help others. We know, too, our donated supplies will be put to good use.

Dick's own commitment and talents were absolutely essential in obtaining the community support we spoke of earlier. As physicians, our pressing professional and personal concerns prevent us from participating in all phases of the project as much as we'd like. Nevertheless, as intimate participants in the health care field, we can access hospital purchasing departments, pharmaceutical companies and representatives, and business and community leaders. The second generation equipment, unexpected surpluses, slightly damaged goods that could still be safely used; or cast offs from closed hospitals, clinics and physician offices represent a wealth to the medically underserved.

An overwhelming amount of material was identified, collected, catalogued and packed under the direction of Dick and the Social Ministry volunteers of his parish. He rented the trucks, found the drivers, coordinated the volunteers, obtained the packing materials and arranged for storage space and final transportation. What we could not provide on our own, he invariably supplied.

Let me not forget the wonderful work of several local OR nurses. Our current president, Mike Aiello, showed up one day with boxes and boxes of OR instruments from a recently closed hospital, all in excellent condition. Six nurses then volunteered their time and expertise to sort and catalog hundreds of pieces of equipment by specialty, which made good order out of the chaos.

Publicity proved to be an unexpected and incalculable aid to our efforts. Our local Diocesan newspaper was invited to cover the sorting and packing of some 175 boxes of supplies for shipment. The following week, a pictorial essay appeared and was read by one of the administrators of a local Catholic hospital. They, in turn, contacted our president and donated dozens of hospital beds, a diagnostic ultrasound machine, a mammography unit and a respirator to the drive.

Having gathered all the supplies, catalogued, packed and stored them, and having identified a viable local organization which would put them to good use without waste or prejudice, what good would our efforts have been without the means to ensure their arrival? Air shipment can be used only for the smallest of packages. Governments may present impediments and supplies may disappear without reaching their destination. Once again, Deacon Lombard found the answer. He had previously worked successfully with Food For The Poor, a non-profit organization based in Deerfield Beach, Florida, dedicated to transporting food, medical and building supplies to the poor in the Caribbean, Central America, South America and Africa. This wonderful organization, under the direction of Ferdie Mahfood, agreed to transport to Trinidad whatever we could gather, thus putting the last essential element into place.

This has been an amazing experience. What started as an idea for an eye clinic in Trinidad has grown tremendously, capturing the imagination of many and triggering an outpouring of charity from many different sources. What we have gathered so far, from bed sheets to corneal trephines, catheters to hand-cranked beds, has been estimated to be worth over \$250,000. One small organization can make a difference. By the time you read this article, these gifts will have been put to good use.

A dream and a vision can become reality. The inspiration evident to us all lies

within the pages of the New Testament. The essential qualities needed to bring such a program to life are intertwined in our role as Catholic physicians and are supplemented by those working intimately with our organization.

Our project is one which can be implemented through the combined efforts of doctors and lay people. People who pack, sort and store these materials need only the guiding supervision of those who are familiar with such equipment. Food for the Poor has graciously volunteered to transport any collectible material through projects such as these free of charge to designated locations in the Caribbean or elsewhere. They can be reached at (305) 427-2222. Perhaps you yourselves might share our vision and initiate a project similar to this one. Your prayers will hopefully bless this and other projects and help ensure their continued success. Perhaps you can share our vision.

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