

Local resident raises \$85,000 to help children

By Robin Uug Staff Writer
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Senior project turns into life changing effort

They call him their guardian angel and know him as the young man that provided them the means to build a kitchen at their orphanage. He says he is just a typical teenager, playing football and preparing to make his next move to Cal Berkeley-but the story of how he devised a plan that included raising \$85,000 in less than a year for children in need may give truth to his title.

Courtland Palmer, a long-time Healdsburg resident and senior at Cardinal Newman, spends most of his time keeping his grades up, playing football and managing the role of class president. It wasn't until he began brainstorming ideas for a school project that he would add humanitarian to his resume.

"At first I was looking for something to do because I heard that we were going to have to do a project our senior year and I am always the kind of guy trying to get things done early," said Palmer.

In search of a plan, Palmer reached out to his Aunt Julie, president of the non-profit 'Here For Them,' a youth service group focused on providing aid for children in the Dominican Republic. "My uncle Russell, my mom's brother and my aunt Julie's husband, passed away and after that, Julie felt like she wanted to do something to help people, so, a long story short she took a trip to the Dominican Republic and there was a freak accident at the resort she was staying at and basically she had to stay a few extra weeks and that is when Julie fell in love with these girls at these two orphanages," Palmer said.

The girls of Hogar Altagracia and Dona Chucha in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic are either orphaned, abandoned or were living in a threatening environment. Through the care of nuns, they are fed, educated and looked after until age 18.

"After she (Julie) told me what she was doing there, I thought that I wanted to do a project where I could leave my mark, I wanted to build something that would have a longtime affect," Palmer said.

In April of 2011, Palmer traveled with his Aunt to meet the young girls of Santo Domingo, see the country and work on a plan for his project.

"You can talk about third world countries and hear people talk about it but you are never going to really understand until you see it and stand on the dirt floor. I was not at all expecting what I saw," Palmer explained.

During his visit, Palmer met Rafaelina Brito, the woman in charge of the orphanages that house close to 100 girls ages 8 to 12 and about 60 girls ages 13-18.

"Rafaelina made it a goal to show me herself where these girls came from, where their homes are or used to be and she wanted to show me what is really going on and the story behind it," Palmer said, "and some of them I couldn't go to because it was too dangerous for me to

step out of the van."

As Palmer reflects back on that day, he recalls finding himself standing in a room made of stacked wood and tin the size of his bedroom back home. There he said he watched as girls as young as five without clothes on, cared for the naked babies in the room a family of nine call home.

"It is the things you hear about but the impact wasn't the same until I saw it for myself and that is the thing that has made me do all of this more than anything else," Palmer said.

For six days Palmer spent time at the orphanages, getting to know the girls, working alongside Rafaelina and making plans with his Aunt Julie on what they could give to these girls that would help them.

Upon returning to Healdsburg, Palmer had a plan for his project. He would need to raise \$85,000 to build Russ's Kitchen, a place that he said would serve three main purposes.

"We came up with the idea for the bakery because it is going to help feed the girls because every month they were behind \$8,000 on food and the second thing is that the orphanage could sell breads and goods to the community to raise money and to help their own struggling community and the third, which I believe is the most important, is that they are going to learn a skill and be taught something that is so important in their culture and to their area because in the Dominican Republic, tourism is their main source of income and they could walk into a resort or restaurant and get a job," Palmer said.

With the help of family and friends, Palmer began fundraising. He cold called friends and told everyone he came across about the project and the funding that he was looking for.

"I developed what I call my elevator speech where if I were to walk into a business building and get in an elevator with someone and we went from the first floor to the fifteenth floor, I would have to be able to get them to understand the whole project, why they should donate and hopefully get them to pull out their check book," said Palmer.

His "elevator speech" worked well and by October of 2011 Palmer had raised the funding to build the kitchen. In December, the kitchen was complete and named for his uncle Russell. This spring, Palmer returned to Santo Domingo to visit the girls and see the kitchen. "It was like I was totally seeing what is going on here in life through a different pair of eyes and it's been the best experience of my life and it has changed how I see everything, literally everything," he said.

Russ's Kitchen is an on-going project that will be taken on by Palmer's younger brother Randall Palmer during his senior project. The two boys continue to raise money in hopes of implementing a culinary certificate program through the kitchen and plan to visit the area annually.

To find out more about Russ's Kitchen and how to donate, visit www.russkitchen.com.