Haiti mission trips are changing lives

By JOAN DEMIRJIAN

A mission trip to Haiti was "life changing" not only for those who received the help of strangers, but for those who volunteered.

Such was the case for a group of volunteers from Valley Lutheran Church in Chagrin Falls, who went to the town of Jacmel in Haiti in November.

"I fell in love with the people in Haiti, who are beautiful and wonderful. I feel truly blessed to be involved," volunteer Gail Gajewski said. "That's why I go back. We had a wonderful trip and team." It was her fifth trip to Haiti.

Valley Lutheran Church Pastor Dan Esala and his wife were in the group on the nine-day trip to aid those still affected by the earthquake that struck last January.

The earthquake affected an estimated 3 million people in Haiti when thousands of homes and buildings collapsed.

The team from Valley Lutheran worked in conjunction with a Lutheran church in Jacmel. Individuals from Valley Lutheran are already planning another trip for next November, according to Mrs. Gajewski. "I'll be going back with the team," she said.

There is a network of churches sending volunteers to Haiti, considered the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere.

"I've missioned with a lot of them," she said. "It's wonderful to have this network.

She and her husband, John, with the Valley Lutheran group, volunteered at an eye-glass clinic that served 147 people in two events at the Lutheran Church of Haiti.

"We brought reading and prescription glasses with us," including used and donated glasses, Mrs. Gajewski said. They had a process of testing to determine vision issues.

"People don't have access to glasses or financial resources," she said of the residents.

Everyone received dry eye drops because it is such a common condition there, Mrs. Gajewski said.

Volunteers from Valley Lutheran Church raised funds which were used to build a house in Haiti. The volunteers from the Chagrin Valley worked alongside Haitian residents.

"We met the family with four children," Mrs. Gajewski said. "And we worked on a second home that was half completed when we left.

"Homes are being built by churches, in an effort to get people from tents into homes," she said. "There are a lot of countries helping out."

Extensive clearing of debris from the earthquake has been taking place. They visited a school that was in tents but has now moved into a building, Mrs. Gajewski said.

Ellie Kuivila, 16, of Chagrin Falls and a junior at Hathaway Brown School in Shaker Heights, was part of the Chagrin Valley group. She and her father Dr. Tom Kuivila, an orthopedic surgeon, also helped with the eye clinic.

"We tested eyes for far-and nearsightedness," she said. They were trained for testing. They distributed eye glasses according to the results of the testing.

"We had hundreds of donations of glasses," Ellie said. Church members had donated many of them.

"People were so grateful," Ellie said. "They were so happy. They included children to adults as old as 90. She said. "It was the whole age spectrum." Jacmel was heavily impacted by the earthquake and there is still a lot of damage, Ellie said. People are still living in tent cities and shacks, she said.

The team had a lot of support from the Chagrin Valley community and Valley Lutheran Church members who donated items, including hygiene kits and other supplies.

The volunteers, who stayed in a hotel, visited a school and hospital, did crafts and conducted Bible school activities.

This isn't the first time Ellie has been involved with helping Haiti. She initiated Skaters for Haiti through the Cleveland Skating Club, where she skates.

When the opportunity came up at her church to help in Haiti, she took it, she said.

"I was expecting the unexpected," Ellie said. "I didn't know what it would be like.

As it turned out, she said, "It was a life-changing experience.

The people have "the best attitudes," Ellie said. "They have so much hope and they believe in themselves. And they are so appreciative.

She is keeping in touch with some of those she met and is e-mailing young people at the church.

"I will remember them forever. They really mean a lot to me. They changed my life."

"I will definitely return the next time a team goes back from our church," she said.

Ellie is a member of "global scholars" at Hathaway Brown, which focuses on international relationships. She is traveling to India with the group this week for 12 days, studying women's role in society.