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Students' trip south is no holiday

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A group of Brampton students are visiting the Dominican Republic this week, but not for rest and recreation.

The students, from Robert F. Hall Catholic Secondary School, left for Puerto Plata yesterday to help people less fortunate than themselves through Integracion Juvenil. They return Feb. 4.

Integracion Juvenil is a non-profit, humanitarian organization, dedicated to finding a solution to the problem of poverty and abandoned children in the Dominican Republic.

Rita Gautschi, a resident of Brampton, sits on the board of directors of Integracion Juvenil and has been involved in helping the less-fortunate people of the Dominican Republic through a charitable organization she formed called Gracias.

Gautschi will be accompanying the 14 students and Robert F.

Hall teacher Gary Connolly.

Although Gautschi has travelled to the Dominican Republic several times, bringing medicine, used clothing, school and craft supplies to Integracion Juvenil, this is the first time she is taking along a group of students.

In the morning the students will be working at Integracion Juvenil's school at Puerto Plata, teaching arts and crafts and possibly some English. Then in the afternoon the students will be visiting local agencies, such as orphanages, other schools and possibly even a sugar plantation.

"The mornings are hands-on," says Connolly, co-co-ordinator of the Louis Riel Brigade of teachers who have travelled to Nicaragua, South America, doing humanitarian work. "In the afternoon the students will be observing and learning."

The students won't be staying in a four-star resort, says Gautschi, adding that the 12 female and two male students

will be living two to a room in a modest hotel in the centre of Puerto Plata.

Gautschi is warning the students to be cautious, not to wear provocative clothing, to drink bottled water and be careful what they eat.

Years ago, Gautschi says the people of the Dominican Republic were able to farm enough food to feed themselves. But now, she says, more people have moved into the cities looking for jobs. Because of a lack of education, she says people cannot find work and they end up living in poverty.

Schooling is compulsory in the country, but Gautschi says many children do not attend because they must work at home, cooking, looking after younger children or working on the streets for a few pesos to buy food for the family.

Through Integracion Juvenil, people between the ages of five and 20, receive educational assis-



Rita Gautschi, left, and a group of local high school students are helping poverty-stricken children in the Dominican Republic through the humanitarian group Integracion Juvenil.

tance, support and job training.

The local students will take two suitcases each to Puerto Plata. One will be filled with their own personal belongings, while the other will contain educational supplies, arts and crafts and tools.

Through Gracias, Gautschi has been collecting hand and small power tools to bring to Integracion Juvenil.