



FRANK CALLEJA/TORONTO STAR

HELPING HANDS: Eve Blake-Davies, left, Rita Gautschi, Bryan Boyle and Hans Gautschi help pack donated goods in Brampton recently. About 4,500 kilograms of material is headed for the Dominican Republic to help impoverished children.

Group aids Dominican street kids

BY FRANK CALLEJA
STAFF REPORTER

Rita Gautschi may be visually impaired, but she sees very well with her heart.

As the driving force behind a group called Gracias, Gautschi has witnessed the often desperate existence of children on the streets of Puerto Plata, Dominican Republic.

These children are so destitute that prostitution becomes an alternative to starvation.

That's why Gautschi and a small, dedicated volunteer organization have made a lasting commitment to help a non-governmental group known as Integracion Juvenil that works with at-risk children and adolescents at the popular vacation destination.

Integracion Juvenil, based in Puerto Plata, operates a centre to provide education, skills and vocational training to about 100 children who otherwise would face a life on the streets.

"We must do all we can, whenever we can to help fund and supply that centre. The lives of hundreds of youngsters depend on it," Gautschi said.

Recently she and other Gracias members packed almost 5,000 kilograms of material, including furnishings, storage and filing cabinets, shelving units, school supplies, crafts and leather, kitchen utensils, even some old computers and small generators.

"You know, even the wooden crates we packed items in for shipment last March were used to make a house for

a single mother and her three children. "Everything is used, nothing is wasted," Gautschi said.

In a letter to the local group, Integracion Juvenil president Rosa de Salcedo said the organization has included a budget for its two most pressing needs, a sexual exploitation street education project and five training workshops.

"Through our efforts, both with families and youth, we stop minors from turning to the streets or prostitution by offering them positive, healthy alternatives," de Salcedo said.

She said one of the group's major needs is a full-time fundraiser to help secure long-term funding and other resources.

"A contribution of \$5,000 would cover a year's salary for that position," she said.

Gautschi has been involved in the group since 1986 and has been totally committed to working for it since 1989.

She and other volunteers have worked with schools, community groups and service clubs on such projects as collecting tools for the centre.

The group has received help from governments at both ends and the assistance of the U.S. military, which provided transport to the Dominican Republic for its project last year.

"This is an example of good neighbors doing what they do best, helping one another," Gautschi said.

Anyone interested in the work of Gracias should contact the group at (905) 793-5544.



HOPE FOR FUTURE: Integracion Juvenil, based in Puerto Plata, Dominican Republic, provides training and education to children who would otherwise face a life on the street.