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Reflexology Helps Heal Those Who Give So Much

Author: Gina Stewart is a Registered Canadian Reflexologist and Certified Foot Reflexology Instructor as well as being certified in Maternity Reflexology. She practices out of her home in a relaxed country setting in Southwestern Ontario. Her services include reflexology, massage therapy, and infrared sauna treatments. Her recent involvement with the FRIENDS OF THE ORPHANS OF CANADA orphanage has inspired her to encourage other reflexologists to volunteer for the upcoming 2010 trip. She may be contacted at newbridgechurch@wightman.ca or via www.reflex-ions.com with any questions.



Courtesy G. Stewart

Author with sponsored child and other orphans.

REFLEXOLOGY HELPS HEAL THOSE WHO GIVE SO MUCH

I had always envisioned combining my love of reflexology and my passion for travel. I never, however, anticipated it would lead me to the rewarding experience of volunteering in the Dominican Republic with *Friends of the Orphans (FOTO) Canada*.

In the spring of 2008 I had an eye opening conversation with a reflexology client who had just returned from a humanitarian trip to the Dominican Republic. She had spent two weeks working at an orphanage and it was easy to see that her experience had had quite an impact on her. Her enthusiasm was infectious and it soon inspired me to get involved with a future *Friends of the Orphans* volunteer trip.



Courtesy G. Stewart

Carmencita (my sponsored child) on the right, walking home from school with her girlfriend.

Friends of the Orphans supports a network of nine *Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos (NPH, Spanish for "Our Little Brothers and Sisters")* homes and their outreach programs in Latin America and the Caribbean. It helps transform the lives of orphaned, abandoned and disadvantaged children by creating families for life through values of unconditional love, shared responsibility and education. This enables children to grow into caring and productive members of their communities. My involvement came in the form of both helping the orphanage and helping to heal the individuals who live in the area and give so much of their time and compassion to the orphans.

The first task was to raise the \$2,500 in support of the orphanage and to cover travel expenses. At the time it seemed insurmountable but I was committed to the cause and decided that I was going to make it happen. By the summer of 2008 I had raised \$1,000 through a three day hot dog sale at a local grocery store. The balance of the funds was raised through garage sales, hosting a reflexology spa day in my home, and other community fundraisers. I was overwhelmed by the generous support of my family, friends and clients as they helped bring me closer to my fundraising goal.

This group, the final of five groups of Canadians to volunteer at the same orphanage, arrived in the Dominican Republic in March 2009. It comprised 43 participants including

Reflexology Helps Heal (cont.)

myself. The children had eagerly anticipated our arrival and were looking forward to spending time with us. In addition to offering my reflexology services to the orphanage staff I also looked forward to spending time with my sponsored child, 9 year old Carmencita Medina.

After organizing myself at the orphanage the team decided that the orphanage staff most in need of stress reduction and relaxation were the tias (housemothers). These women leave their own children for seven days at a time in order to spend twenty four hours a day taking care of the orphans.

Every day I would head to the houses where the tias attended to the children. With my limited Spanish, but armed with my translation book, I was able to tell them that I would be providing a relaxing foot massage that would provide healing benefits. They had never heard of reflexology but the idea of having a whole hour of relaxation to themselves definitely appealed to them. We may not have spoken the same language, but reflexology helped connect us and break down barriers between us.

Within the first week, word of the reflexology treatments had spread to the other tias. It was not unusual to have a crowd of women congregating outside whatever house I was in. As I made my way from house to house I would often find a tia motioning for me to come over to her. I would answer back, manana (tomorrow).



Spending play time with a very special little girl.



The housemothers (tias) were shy to be on their own for a reflexology treatment...in this photo support from another tias (left) and fellow volunteer

Courtesy G. Stewart

Front doors that were usually locked were now left wide open in anticipation of my arrival. Fresh towels and a warm foot soak were already set up in preparation for the reflexology. Many grateful women had remarkable ways of showing their appreciation for the gift of reflexology. I received many small gifts and one tia even sang to me... a most moving experience. I found the Dominicans to be such warm and loving people and I felt honoured by their shows of thanks.

During my two week stay I provided more than thirty reflexology treatments. The healing aspects of the reflexology allowed me to share common ground with these tias. I felt exceptionally privileged to have created a bond with so many of these women. On my last day many of them approached me and asked whether I would be returning next year. They were saddened by me leaving and my departure was very emotional on both sides.

The author is planning a second visit to the Dominican Republic in March 2010 and is looking to put together a small team of reflexologists.

If you are interested in getting involved with a visit please contact the author at newbridgechurch@wightman.ca as soon as possible – details are being finalized soon.

For more information about Friends of the Orphans Canada visit www.fotocan.org. ❖

Courtesy G. Stewart