



GIVING B TOGETHER



Photography by Lifetouch

Principals volunteer to change lives in Puerto Rico and elsewhere throughout the world

Since 2000, the Lifetouch Memory Mission has served children, families, and communities locally and globally. With NAESP, the School Superintendents Association (AASA), the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), the National School Boards Association (NSBA), and National PTA, Lifetouch volunteers have built K–8 schools in 12 Haitian villages; built schools in Constanza and Rio Grande, Dominican Republic; rebuilt homes in war-ravaged Kosovo; constructed a roof for an early childhood education center in Jamaica; repaired homes in Appalachia; assisted victims of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans; and constructed a footbridge that enables students to get to school safely in the Navajo Nation, Arizona.

Most recently, in January 2019, 41 volunteers representing 21 states and three Canadian provinces traveled to Juncos, Puerto Rico, to assist the students and staff of Colegio Bautista. The K–9 school was severely damaged by Hurricane Maria; some classrooms were beyond repair, and the playground was completely destroyed. While thousands of Puerto Ricans were forced to leave the island, families of 125 Colegio Bautista students chose to stay, some going without water and electricity for more than six months.

Glen P. Messier, principal of Mechanicsville Elementary School in Carroll County, Maryland, was one of the principals selected for the 2019 Lifetouch Memory Mission. “This trip allowed me to reflect and change my perspective on life,” he says. “So much of what I do as a principal,

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parent, and husband is focused on getting the task completed and moving on to the next item and not taking time to truly appreciate what I have. Listening to the families share their experiences during Hurricane Maria was extremely powerful. Their positivity and resiliency after Hurricane Maria was admirable and humbling. I quickly realized that I need to slow down, enjoy the moment, and be grateful!”

After the Disaster

In Juncos, the volunteers helped with the demolition of a classroom, cleared the school grounds of debris, refurbished the playground, and built a perimeter wall to protect the school grounds. But beyond that, the volunteers built relationships with each other and with members of the community.

“Perseverance and collective efficacy created something amazing,” says Memory Mission volunteer Frances R. Finney, a 2014 NAESP National Distinguished Principal from Grantswood Community School in Irondale, Alabama. “Most think of the difficult work, yet what I remember are the strangers who came together and left as a lifelong team. Those strangers were the members of the Memory Mission team and the community we served together!”

Other NAESP member volunteers on the 2019 Lifetouch Memory Mission were: Eric Cardwell, NAESP past president and former principal of Besser Elementary School in Alpena, Michigan; Chad Shook, superintendent of Lawton-Bronson Schools in Bronson, Iowa; and Todd Boucher, principal of Popp’s Ferry Elementary School in Biloxi, Mississippi.

On each of these trips, Lifetouch volunteers also leveraged their photography skills and equipment to provide a traditional picture day to the students and community. After the volunteers take the photos, photo packages are printed at a Lifetouch facility in the United States and flown to the volunteer site to be distributed to families.

“Giving back is so foundational to who we are as a company that ‘We make a difference’ is the first of our 10 company values,” says Agnes Semington, vice president of human resources for Lifetouch. “As a company, we help people share life’s joy, and giving back through employee volunteer efforts like Memory Mission is a big part of that.”

Growing a School

In 2020, the Lifetouch Memory Mission will return to Rio Grande, Dominican Republic, site



of the 2016–2018 Lifetouch Memory Missions. During that time, volunteers built a bright yellow, two-story school and cafeteria that became a beacon of hope for families in Rio Grande. The new school replaced a one-room school that had provided education for only 18 students. The rest of the children were faced with the difficult decision to walk 5 miles round-trip for a half-day of school, or if they were old enough, work to help support their families. Faced with this decision, most children did not attend school.

“With our goal of coming alongside communities to support projects that support families and education, this seemed like the perfect place for Lifetouch volunteers to continue our mission of giving back,” says Jan Haeg, director of Lifetouch Memory Missions.

When Lifetouch leaders returned to Rio Grande for the school’s dedication ceremony in October 2018, they learned that 70 families had moved to the community because of the new school. Inspired by the commitment of these families to educate their children, the Lifetouch Memory Mission team is now returning to Rio Grande to expand the school. While there, volunteers will deepen the connection between the Memory Mission teams and this growing community—just like the 2019 volunteers did in Juncos.

“Helping with all of the construction tasks was exciting and something new to experience, but I really enjoyed every minute spending time in the classrooms and learning alongside the students,” Messier says. “The students and staff at Colegio Bautista quickly welcomed us into their school and classrooms, and then the magic of relationship-building occurred. Receiving a self-portrait from one of the students is [something] I will cherish forever!”

No Experience Necessary

As with all Memory Mission projects, volunteers do not need previous construction experience or knowledge. On-site construction leaders will arrange job tasks and provide direction to ensure that the projects are completed well. Volunteers and Lifetouch employees raise funds throughout the year to purchase all required construction supplies.

“The Memory Mission trip is truly a once-in-a-lifetime, life-changing experience!” Messier says. “From giving back to a community in need, learning more about the culture of Puerto Rico, and building relationships that will last forever, this experience will change you for the good. I am forever grateful to have been afforded the opportunity to experience the Memory Mission trip.” 

LEARN MORE

Members of NAESP and other educators are encouraged to apply for the 2020 Lifetouch Memory Mission by Sept. 23, 2019. Applicants must be residents of the United States or Canada and be 21 years of age as of Sept. 23, 2019. See the application and eligibility requirements online at lifetouchmemorymission.com.