When three William Paterson University of New Jersey (WPU) nursing students traveled to the Dominican Republic as volunteers with a medical mission there, they did so with enthusiasm and the expectation that they were being given an opportunity to make a difference in the lives of the people in this Third World community. But Thao (Anit) Nguyen of South Plainfield, N.J., Ashley Perone of Belle Meade, and Raissa Lynn Sánchez of Sussex, all members of the nursing honor society Sigma Theta Tau and all graduating seniors, soon discovered that the trip was making a difference in their own lives and confirming their commitment to the nursing profession.

Using their nursing skills to provide humanitarian aid to patients in the San Pedro area of the Dominican Republic, the three got an up-close-and-personal view of the trying conditions and circumstances that are the norm for their patients, whose typical medical care might be intermittent at best. They provided hands-on care, under the direction of a nurse practitioner and a physician, as they traveled to various clinics and to a prison to administer over-the-counter medications and vitamins, but also to teach patients about proper nutrition and health. Their trip was organized under the auspices of Foundation for Peace, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to working hand in hand with people in need to enable their emergence from poverty.

Their personal odyssey, which has so deeply affected the lives of these three young nurses, began inauspiciously enough at a regional meeting of Sigma Theta Tau’s International Honor Society in New York City. Dr. Joanne Hofmann, nurse practitioner and professor at Hunter College, talked about being a volunteer medical mission leader for the Foundation for Peace in San Pedro, explaining she has been going on these missions for the past few years. When she mentioned that the foundation was organizing another mission to San Pedro, it really got Perone, Nguyen and Sánchez’s attention.

“She mentioned that she had a few spots left open. Once we heard this, all three of us just looked at each other and said, ‘We have to do this!’ It was a wonderful joint effort, and we were all immediately excited at the prospect,” says Perone.

“For me, hearing about this trip re-ignited in me a passion I had to experience new things while doing what I enjoy best: helping others. I’ve always had a desire to experience nursing on more than one level. I wanted to be removed from the comfort of our New Jersey hospitals and be thrown into unfamiliar territory so that I could truly test my autonomy and skills. I really wanted to meet new people, experience a different culture and aid in delivering health care to those who really needed it.”

Nguyen, whose family came from Vietnam, echoed Perone’s sentiments about a passion for helping. “Coming from a family where my parents came to America with not even a penny, but have been able to put their children through college, has opened my eyes to many things. I have always had a passion for helping others and especially those who are less fortunate than me. The idea has always been there, but I never had an opportunity.”

For Sánchez, this trip was not only a chance to help others, but an experience she could share with someone very close. “My mother, Paulina Sánchez, was part of the trip, too. She acted as our ‘professional guardian.’ She’s an RN as well, and works on the oncology floor at St.
Claire's of Denville. I was so excited to share this kind of experience with the woman who continues to inspire me. I've always wanted to do something like this – but as a nurse, not just as a volunteer, because I knew I wanted to go overseas with a skills set. As the presentation went on, it clicked in my head. I thought, 'This is something I have to do. It's now or never – or at least not for a while.' Fate is literally throwing this opportunity in my face, and I need to grab it.'”

With the blessings of their faculty advisor and department chairs, the young nurses e-mailed Hofmann “right away, and a month after the meeting, we were on the plane, on our way to San Pedro, Dominican Republic,” says Nguyen.

“We were welcomed with open arms into the orphanage where we stayed and had meals prepared for us three times a day,” says Perone. “We quickly formed close friendships with the local translators and members of the orphanage. When we visited the bateys [which are old sugarcane fields where people still live], we were greeted and welcomed as well. At the end of each day, they would tell us about their community and how the people truly believe God had brought us to them. They were thankful with every ounce of their hearts. It was the most genuine and heartfelt thanks I had ever received in my life, and I found myself in tears most every day. The people wore their very best when they came for their visits and were friendly and excited to talk to us. Some of my patients were so excited that they tried learning English as I tried learning their Spanish!”

For Nguyen, the comparison of the Dominican Republic to Vietnam gave her a great comfort level there. “I could not have been any happier to be where I was as soon as we landed. I honestly felt at home. It is still so crazy to me – how being away from my family and friends at home and being placed in a country where I’ve never been before with people I’ve never interacted with before can make me feel so good and happy. Just seeing how happy everyone was to see us and be near us melted my heart.”

For Sánchez, it was all about family. “It was beautiful. The land, the communities and most especially the people! The Dominicans, and most Hispanic cultures, I feel, are a people who love their families. I saw that when we first landed and during our many clinic hours.”

What was most impressive to the young nurses was the spirit of a people poor in material wealth, but rich in spirit.

“Although resources in the Dominican Republic are limited, they try their hardest to work with what they do have and are happy,” explains Nguyen. “I feel like the people in Dominican Republic are one happy family who all lend a helping hand to help each other no matter what the problem may be. Whether family, friends, neighbors or strangers, they all helped each other at all times.”

Sánchez says the spirit of the people is even more impressive given the degree of poverty. “It would be naïve to say that the way I or any of my friends grew up was relatable to how these children are growing up. The way of life in some of these communities is heartbreaking to the average American, but many are proud to be where they are, and to say that ‘we feel bad for them’ only displaces their familial pride. But I do believe that there is a way to understand them, and that’s with the rule of not taking the things one has in life for granted.”

Perone notes that the people have adapted to the harshest conditions without surrendering their pride and zest for living. “There is no large-scale trash collection in the Dominican Republic, and the people burn the garbage. As I flew down to land on my way into the country, I saw smoke...
rising from numerous locations and was perplexed as to what it was." She found out it was trash being burned all over the country.

“The most amazing part was that while corrugated metal made up most of the homes in the bateys, and concrete was absent from the floors, the homes and communities were clean. The people presented their homes with pride and passion. And where my house outdid their’s in size, their houses outdid mine in pride.”

All three nurses noted that the days were long and rigorous, but none complained about the working conditions.

“A typical day would start with waking up around 7:00 a.m. We would have breakfast at 7:30 a.m. and be ready to board the bus and go to a local batey around 8:30 a.m. We would see patients until around 4:00 p.m. and then clean up and head back to the orphanage,” explains Nguyen. But their day was far from over. “We then began to do sorting of medications and hygiene kits. A hygiene kit generally contained a toothbrush, toothpaste, a washcloth, soap, Band-Aids and some other odds and ends like hand sanitizer. Some kits had each of the items mentioned, and others had only some as we did not have enough supplies. We would also count medications, both over-the-counter and prescription, and bag them into groups of 30 pills. We did this until dinner, around 6:30 p.m. After dinner, around 7:30, we would do more medication counting and hygiene kits before we showered and went to bed.”

Nguyen says the nonstop pace began as soon as they arrived. “The day we landed, we went back to the orphanage and put together over 1,000 hygiene kits to pass out to the families.”

Sánchez was amazed by the sheer number of people who were seen in a single day at one of the bateys, but says she and the others tried to always make a little time for fun at the end of the day. “After 10 p.m., time was spent at our discretion. We weren’t allowed to leave the orphanage for security reasons, so Nguyen and I would stay up late with some of our translators, playing Uno or other board games that were available. One of the nights, I learned how to play dominoes... loudly, which is apparently culturally acceptable. It was fun! I miss those warm nights.”

Still, it wasn’t all fun and games. One of Perone’s biggest fears before embarking on the trip was the idea of visiting one of the island’s prisons to treat the prisoners there. She says she felt frightened as she walked across the grounds through a walkway of prisoners with their handcuffs clanking and into the safety of their barred work area. But her work made her forget her fears. “Once I began seeing patients with the RN I was paired with and my translator, I forgot that we were in a jail. At one point, I remember feeling smacked in the stomach as a 20-year-old boy told us of how he murdered a man and ended up in this jail. I thought to myself, I should be afraid. I asked myself, should these patients be treated differently because they are criminals? And I looked at the young boy in front of me and said, no, when it comes to receiving much-needed care, when it comes to giving medications that are long overdue, these people are just the same and should be treated that way.”

Nguyen was nervous as well, but was relieved when the actual experience wasn’t anything like she expected it to be. “We saw hundreds of prisoners. It took place in a big assembly room in the prison where there were 16 tables set up so that the two nurses, translator and prisoner could be seated and talk about their health issues. Of course, knowing some of the prisoners’ history of how they ended up in jail made me nervous, however, they did not disrespect us at all and were very receptive to us being there as
well. There were prison guards all around us, so I did not feel in danger.”

Like Perone and Nguyen, Sánchez saw this experience as an ethical imperative and wasn’t fearful about being in the company of convicted felons. “I wasn’t scared at all. I mean, maybe if I sat there and thought about it, I’d feel more nervous. In fact, I think I was more excited and glad to be there. Prisoners, despite their crime, deserve medical attention. An ethical decision, yes, but even these prisoners are people, and a nurse or a doctor must do their job fairly and without bias. Besides, there was obviously great security there.”

All three young nurses are grateful to the Foundation for Peace for allowing them the opportunity to join this mission. “Going with the foundation was very rewarding,” says Perone. “They were so organized and helpful and really knew the area and the population that we were working with. The trip ran incredibly smooth, and it was all due to those people. It was an honor to help to achieve their goals of establishing consistent health care to underserved populations in the Dominican Republic.”

“This experience has been life-changing for me,” says Nguyen. “I can’t even describe the feeling I felt on my way home from the Dominican Republic. I felt accomplished, touched, appreciated and sad all at once. I felt sad for having to leave but mostly touched by the many people I have encountered by how they have changed my view on things. I went into this trip not knowing what to expect and came out with so much knowledge and experience along with many new friends.”

Sánchez, whose trip was heightened because of the opportunity to share the experience and bond with her own mother, is unabashed in her enthusiasm for Foundation for Peace and its mission. “I love the Foundation for Peace! They’re so easy to work with, and they make going overseas to help a very simple process,” says Sánchez. “One of the schools that we had our clinic in was impressive! I had a computer room for students who intend on being future engineers, a cosmetology section for those interested in being a certified beautician, and many traditional classrooms for those who want to be teachers and such. The Foundation for Peace enriched my life in a way that nothing else ever could. The steppingstone for me to do something I’ve always wanted to do. I believe that they will be the platform on which I will base the rest of my career.”

Perone, Nguyen and Sánchez are just as mindful of the important role William Paterson University has played in helping them acquire the skills to merit this opportunity.

Perone says that attending WPU’s nursing program has exceeded all her expectations. “I have become a professional and a woman that I never thought I would be. I have made connections with my professors, found mentors and looked out for chances to challenge myself. Without those important connections with professors and advisers, it would have been difficult. I am able to question things and give my input, and I am encouraged to go for what I desire.”

For Nguyen, WPU’s nursing program is outstanding because of the accessibility and helpfulness of faculty and staff to students like her. “To single out one part of the nursing program at WPU and say that it is the best part is hard to do since I have had only the best nursing experiences at this university. I know that I can always count on the nursing professors and faculties to be there for me for questions or help. I feel really knowledgeable graduating this year and knowing that I had the best education possible and, at the same time, the best professors.”

Sánchez says she sees WPU as a place where she is viewed as a whole person, not just a name and number on a class roll. “What stands out in our faculty is that, despite how difficult the courses are made out to be, they still reach out to their students and, most importantly, care about them. Even in failure, many students run to their professors for guidance, and it is with the WPU nursing professors that they can find this. “When the three of us came back from our trip, the rest of the faculty congratulated us and remembered our names even though the last time we saw them was years ago, when we were sitting in their class. It feels awesome to be in the WPU nursing program because we are recognized, not just as students, but people. Just as hard as it was to leave San Pedro, it’s going to be even harder to leave WPU.”

Back at the university, Perone, Nguyen and Sánchez are seen as positive role models and ambassadors of its nursing program. “This trip should create awareness of health needs around the world for the students,” says Kem Louie, associate professor of nursing at William Paterson, director of the graduate nursing program, and the honor society’s advisor. “They learned how nurses can play an important role in health care in the community.”