

A Sweet Deal for One Family

Record-Journal City Editor Eric Cotton recently composed the following editorial in response to reporter Dan Champagne's nine days in La Romana, Dominican Republic, with missionaries from this area.



Commentary by
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Record-Journal

Each summer a Wallingford missionary team travels to the Dominican Republic to help the poor who live and work on the sugar plantations of La Romana.

The local group has built a hospital there and provides on site healthcare in the shanty villages. Reporter Dan Champagne traveled with the missionary team last month and wrote extensively about the effort.

So what's the American company that owns the sugar plantations doing? It's building lavish resorts with PGA-caliber golf courses, contributing millions to the campaigns of U.S. politicians, and collecting millions more in U.S. subsidies. Naturally.

The plantations are owned by the Central Romana Corp., a subsidiary of Flo-Sun Inc. of Palm Beach, Fla., one of the largest producers of raw sugar in the United States. Flo-Sun owns Florida Crystals, which owns American Sugar Refining. You see some of their products in the supermarket under the Domino Foods brand name.

Flo-Sun is operated by the Fanjul family, "Cuban-American descendants of the wealthy Gomez-Mena family of Cuba, which controlled much of the American-dominated sugar industry in Cuba until Fidel Castro seized power," according to a report by the Center for Responsive Politics accessible at www.opensecrets.org.

The Fanjuls make their offices in a posh compound and live in multimillion-dollar mansions in Palm Beach. Flo Sun dominates the Florida sugar industry, benefiting heavily from U.S. price supports, to the tune of \$65 million per year, according to estimates by the General Accounting Office.

The company is privately held, so we don't know how profitable it is or exactly how much it benefits from the U.S. sugar program.

"They might be called the first family of corporate welfare," Time Magazine wrote of the Fanjuls in a 1998 special report.

The family purchased the Central Romana Corp. and its Dominican sugar plantations in the 1980s and today are the largest exporters of Dominican sugar. The Fanjuls' operation in the Dominican Republic benefits from a quota system the federal government uses to control access to the U.S. market, according to the report in Time.

And, of course, production costs in the Dominican Republic are far lower than in Florida since most of Central Romana's workers, mainly illegal immigrants from Haiti, earn less than \$2.50 per day.

Here's what the latest State Department human rights report had to say: "Most sugarcane worker villages lacked schools, medical facilities, running water, and sewage systems, and had high rates of disease.

Company-provided housing was sub-standard. In various sugarcane industry shantytowns, field guards reportedly kept workers' clothes and documents to prevent them from leaving until the end of the harvest.

Employers also withheld wages to keep workers in the fields." Meanwhile, U.S. politicians accepted \$233,000 in campaign contributions from the Fanjul family in the 2006 election cycle alone.

Democratic Senate and Congressional committees received \$57,000. Republican Senate and Congressional committees received \$47,500.

George W. Bush and Hillary Rodham Clinton were the most frequent recipients among individual candidates. Others included U.S. Senators Robert Menendez, D-N.J., Bill Nelson, D-Fla., and Kent Conrad, D N. D.; and U.S. Reps. Connie Mack, R-Fla., John Salazar, D Colo., Patrick J. Kennedy, D R. I., and Mike McIntyre, D N. C.

You can look it up.

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THE FIRST TIME John Powers visited La Romana, in the Dominican Republic, he immediately wanted to head back to the airport and go home. He only went because he had just married his wife, Aimée, who wanted to travel to the area as a missionary. He didn't want her to go alone.

"I wasn't big into foreign countries; sleeping in strange places wasn't for me," Powers said. "When we first arrived at the dorm in La Romana, I said, 'Please tell me we're just stopping to ask directions.'"

He spent that first trip removing debris from a garbage dump and filling in holes with cement at what would eventually become the site of The Good Samaritan Hospital.

Everyone on the trip got sick. They had no running water. They had to wash in the ocean.

"Everything was so out of my comfort zone," he said. "We went on our honeymoon in St. Thomas because it was American." John and Aimée Powers did not return to La Romana in 1991 because of the birth of their first child, Josh, now 15. It would be five years before they returned, which happened to coincide with John Powers joining the Rotary Club.

Powers brought news of the trips to Rotary, which now gives out yearly scholarships to two Wallingford high school students to make the trip, along with providing money to ship materials to La Romana.

He has traveled to the island with groups led by the Rev. William Huegel of The First Baptist Church of Wallingford each year since.

"It was really strange to come here and then not come for a few years," he said. "I would be driving along and I would just start crying, and this is five years after I came. It was always on my mind."

Ten years later, Powers has become the leader of the annual trips for local students and adults. He is the man with the answers, the schedule and the cell phone. He has also become a member of the hospital's board of directors.

He sends out the mass e-mails to the group about team meetings and flight information, he makes sure everyone is where they need to be once the group begins work and he makes sure there is enough cheese pizza when the cook brings out a few covered with salami.

And he does it all with an unwavering sense of positivity and a smile that is as much a part of his



John Powers, of Wallingford, helps build a school in Batey La Higuera, Dominican Republic.

daily attire as his Boston Red Sox cap.

"To think God chose someone like me to do this was something I never would have thought would happen in a million years," said Powers, 41, a 1982 Sheehan High School graduate. "God has used me, a regular guy who grew up in Wallingford who doesn't speak Spanish, to do this. If he wants this done, who am I to fight it?"

"No greater joy"

"John is a man that doesn't know how to create conflict," said Moises Sifren, administrator for The Good Samaritan Hospital. "If two people have a disagreement, he will come and find a way to lead them to a resolution. He knows how to make one person lose a little bit and gain a little bit at the same time. We need 10 more people like him." Powers, the communications director of the Children's Home of Cromwell, stood in front of the group after breakfast each morning and made sure everyone knew where they needed to go and answered any questions they might have. And boy did they have questions.

"John, when can I exchange money for pesos?" "Hey John Powers, where can I get a phone card?" "John, will there be time to go to the beach today?" The answers came just as quick as the questions.

"If someone comes to me with a question, I tell them to go to John," Huegel said. "John has an abiding faith in Christ and he's just so joyous about it and he wants the same for everybody. He keeps letting people come on the trip because he just can't turn any one away. He knows they'll be impacted spiritually." Armed with only four years of high