

A fundraiser for 'those who have it even worse'

By Jason R. Vallee
Record-Journal staff

WALLINGFORD —When John Powers and his wife Aimee first traveled to the Dominican Republic with the First Baptist Church as part of a missionary program, they just wanted to do what they could to make a difference. Powers never dreamed that 20 years later the program would grow into a community-wide effort that helps provide clean water, food and medical supplies annually to residents in La Romana.

Standing before an audience of more than 1,000 area residents Saturday evening during the annual dinner and 20th anniversary celebration for the Dominican Republic Mission Team at Sheehan High School, Powers couldn't help but smile to see people opening their hearts and wallets to support those in need.

"It's been 20 years since the first 11 people went, and we haven't looked back," Powers said. "More than 1,000 people have traveled with us and we continue to receive more requests than ever."

The dinner held each March has been the primary fundraiser for the program and in the past several years has helped raise at least \$20,000 for the July trip. Although residents have struggled with a tough economy, Powers said it hasn't stopped people from donating to the cause — and with the largest turnout ever, he was hopeful they would exceed the goal once again.

"The phenomenon has been that because it hits close to home, people want to support those who have it even worse," he said.

The night started like any of the previous fundraisers, with an Italian dinner and silent auction, but participants were

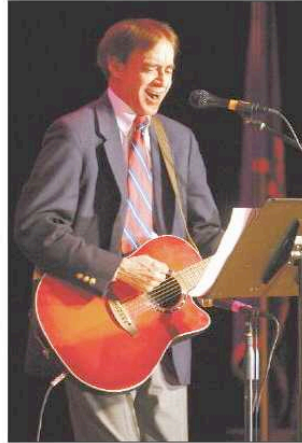
in for a surprise when the entertainment began. In an hour-long presentation hosted by local resident Jenni French and produced and directed by Powers' son Josh, 18, those in attendance were treated to "The Traci Basic Show."

The show featured full video production including a documentary of French's trip to La Romana as the character Traci Basic and appearances from "Sweeter than Wine," a musical group that has opened for Earth, Wind & Fire — and Mayor William W. Dickinson Jr.

When the program first got under way in 1990, Dickinson had said the effort was an important step in helping mankind, and named La Romana a sister city to Wallingford. Dickinson, who also surprised the crowd with a musical tribute, reinforced that message Saturday night.

"Wallingford has a very special foreign policy and this mission is an incredible statement of what that policy is — to help others," he said.

The group looks to start the new FulFILLing Smiles program in the Dominican Republic in July. The program aims to raise enough money — roughly \$15,000 — to provide enough food for a month to every resident in the five vil-



Photos by Johnathon Henninger / Record-Journal

Left: Wallingford Mayor William W. Dickinson Jr. performs at the annual fundraiser for the Dominican Republic Mission Team at Sheehan High School Saturday. **Right:** Rhonda Feniolo, of Wallingford, bids on a painting during the silent auction that was part of the fundraiser.

lages the group will visit.

Saturday's proceeds will also go toward helping the Wallingford Rotary Club in its efforts to build bio-sand filters to reduce the disease that has led to the deaths of many children, said Jim Comeau, volunteer.

"With everything going on in Haiti and with the economy the way it is, it's just amazing

to see how this community continues to come together and provide more each year,"

he said. "This support is helping to save lives and truly make the world a better place."