

# The Providence Journal

METRO EDITION

Friday, March 31, 2006

## SENIORITIS? NOT AT THE MET

"These were shy and introverted girls. Now they [know what it's like to] stand up for something."

**MAKALA FIELDS**

Advisor to Met students Amber Peralta and Jackelyn Sierra



Met students Amber Peralta, right, 18, and Jackelyn Sierra, 17, enjoy a laugh together.

**BY LINDA BORG**

Journal Staff Writer

PROVIDENCE -- Imagine walking into a hospital where patients are placed three to a bed, where there is a shortage of surgical gloves, where the floors and the linens are filthy.

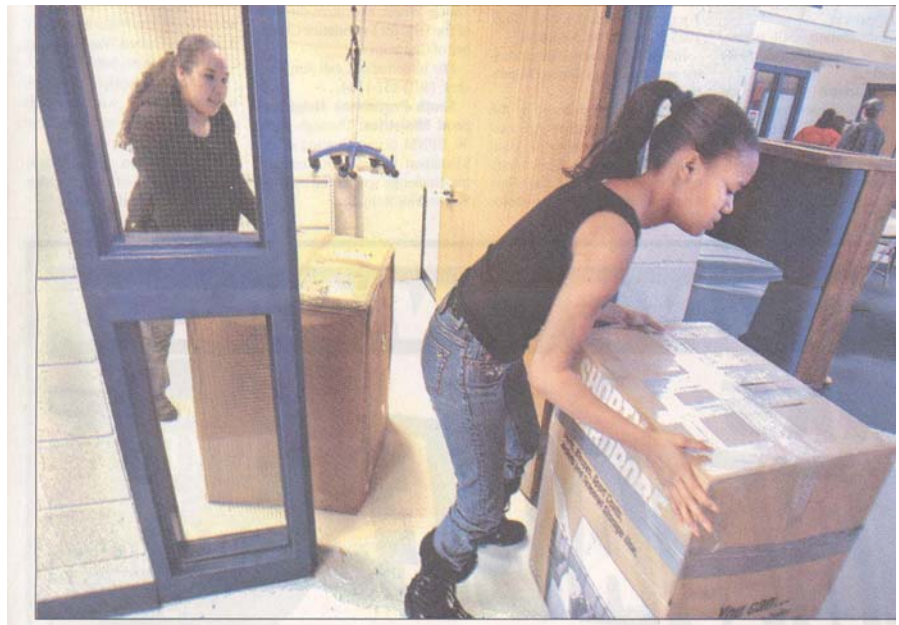
Now imagine being turned away because you don't have the money to pay for treatment, even though your injuries are grievous.

That is exactly what Ambar Peralta encountered when she took her badly burned

cousin to a small hospital in the Dominican Republic, in the town of Bonao near the capital.

"It was completely unsanitary," said Peralta, 18, a senior at the Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center, a state-run alternative high school. "We brought in my 13-year-old cousin who was burned over his back. We had to create a commotion just to get help. Civilization does not exist in that hospital."

This experience only deepened Peralta's resolve to send medical supplies to the village. For the past six months, Peralta and another senior, Jackelyn Sierra, 17, have been asking medical supply companies in Southern New England to donate their products.



So far, the young women have gathered thousands of dollars worth of gloves, trays, first-aid kits, masks, sheets, surgical gowns and surgical scissors, enough to fill 10 huge boxes. Their goal is to raise \$1,200 to ship the supplies to the hospital in time for their visit next month. .

What sets them apart from other motivated teenagers is that Sierra and Peralta embarked on the project to fulfill their graduation requirements. To graduate from the Met, each senior must conduct a year-long project that benefits the student as well as the community.

By the end of senior year, each student must write a research paper, compose a personal reflection on what they've learned and present their findings to the public, typically teachers and friends. Think of a master's thesis writ small.

What makes this work powerful is that it encourages students to explore their passions, to make connections between possible careers and real-world experiences, according to their adviser, Makala Fields. The senior project is also supposed to bring together all of the student's personal and academic skills -- their ability to gather and synthesize data, to problem-solve and ultimately, to express what the experience meant on a personal level.

"These were shy and introverted girls," Fields said. "Now they [know what it's like to] stand up for something."

The senior project is as varied as the students who write them. One senior is putting on a fashion show, another is creating parent engagement workshops at a local elementary school, another is writing a cookbook for college students. Two students are volunteering at a clinic in Jamaica this spring.

The Met School, which is actually a network of small campuses scattered throughout Providence, is ahead of the game. In two years, all high school seniors will have to demonstrate that they have acquired certain skills -- either through a capstone project or a portfolio of work -- to graduate.

Sierra and Peralta started their project in the fall. They researched the medical challenges in the Dominican Republic, then began a letter-writing campaign, contacting dozens of medical supply companies in Rhode Island, Massachusetts and Connecticut. Two firms, Claflin Medical Equipment and TheraEase, made generous donations.

"Do you know how much is thrown away?" Peralta said. "Two hundred tons of medical supplies in New England a year."

Next, the girls found a company that was willing to ship the supplies at a discount. They have raised \$200; they need another \$600 to pay for shipping.

Meanwhile, the young women have been busy applying to college. Both students have listed Brown University as their first choice, and they both want to pursue medical careers. Peralta wants to become a pediatrician and Sierra wants to be an obstetrician.

"This is a blessing," Fields said. "They have gone so far above and beyond what was expected of them."

"It feels really good to be helping another country that isn't my own," Sierra said. "I never thought I could do something like this."

[lborg@projo.com](mailto:lborg@projo.com) / (401) 277-7823