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Stark Serves as North Carolina Leader for Christian Sports Medicine Alliance

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C. – Preventing and managing sports injuries is all in a day's work for Stephenie Stark. As an athletic trainer for Gardner-Webb's cross country, track and field, and women's basketball programs, she thought she'd seen it all. But when a personal health crisis threatened her life last spring, she knew some things were going to change. She never imagined it would ultimately lead her thousands of miles from home, or that she would find God-given purpose in simply sitting with an orphan girl, chatting and painting fingernails.

"Back at the end of February, I got sick," Stark recalled. "I was hospitalized, they told me I had cancer. I ended up missing more than two weeks of work." Going through that experience, she said, made her think about things and look at things differently. Fortunately, doctors discovered that she did not have cancer, but that a benign tumor was causing her symptoms. Feeling like she'd received a second chance, she decided to research ways she could use her medical training to help others in the mission field.

That's when she got connected with the Christian Sports Medicine Alliance. Their motto is "medicine with a mission" and their goal is to provide sports medicine professionals with opportunities to use their gifts, talents, and training to share the gospel of Jesus Christ around the world. In July, as a result of her interest, Stark was invited to go on a week-long summer mission trip to the Dominican Republic, coordinated by the group SCORE International.

Like many mission efforts, the financial requirements can often be prohibitive. Stark said her church, Advent Lutheran in Kings Mountain, N.C., offered her more support than she ever thought possible. "My church was amazing," she said. "I presented the opportunity to our missions team and explained why we were going and what we were going to do, and they said they loved every aspect of it and wanted me to go. They were 100 percent supportive both emotionally and financially."

Traveling with an Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) boys basketball team, among others, Stark and other volunteers embarked on their week-long adventure into the non-resort areas of the Dominican Republic.

"In the morning, we went and did mission work," said Stark. "We would go out to a sugar cane village, or to an orphanage. In the afternoon, we would go out and play basketball. Our traveling teams would take on a team of Dominican players." She would offer general mission services during the morning hours, and then during the athletic events, would give her training expertise to both teams. There was also an evangelical component with devotionals led by American athletes between games. The focus was to share the message of the Gospel to people who otherwise may not hear about the love of Christ.

"During the sports events, if anyone needed to be evaluated for an injury, I would help," she said. "I would assess the injury and offer my services and expertise." She recalled a situation in which an American player collided with a Dominican boy, resulting in a serious cut. Stark helped clean the wound, and the player ended up getting stitches because of her treatment recommendation.

Her time at the orphanages had a lasting impact, and her eyes twinkled as she discussed her experience with a particular 10-year-old Dominican orphan. Upon arriving at the orphanage, she was overwhelmed by the response from the children. "A huge group of kids ran up to us, grabbed our hands and pulled us where they wanted us to go," she said. Stark's new little friend refused to leave her side.

"At one point, I asked her if she wanted to join a group that was singing and dancing," Stark shared. "Through the interpreter, she said, 'No, I just want to sit here with you and spend time with you.' I could have cried right there. I couldn't really talk to her, but it didn't matter. Just the fact that I was there, just sitting with her, being together, was enough for her." The girls bonded by braiding each other's hair, painting each other's fingernails, and of course, lots of giggles.

"When it was time to go, she grabbed my hand and said, 'Please don't leave,' and she was holding on so tight," Stark reflected. "I just started crying. It was tough."

The emotional moment was one of several that Stark now treasures from her time in the mission field. Now that she is back at home, she is working to get the word out about the Christian Sports Medicine Alliance so that others can share in similar experiences. "We want to let [sports medicine professionals] know there is this opportunity out there not just for athletic trainers, but for exercise physiologists, conditioning experts, nutritionists, maybe even nurses," she said.

For Stark, her first mission trip will most certainly not be her last. "I feel like I'm being called back to the Dominican Republic," she shared. "I can help get the structure of the program established even more and help with other organizational aspects."

Additional information on Christian Sports Medicine Alliance, including their fundraising efforts, is available at christiansportsmed.org. Stephenie Stark can be reached via email at stephenies@christiansportsmed.org.

SCORE International was founded in 1984 by Ron Bishop and started out as a sports mission ministry. Today, SCORE has expanded into a full-service mission organization that sends thousands of groups on short-term mission trips all over the world. Their goal is to evangelize, equip & encourage.

Located in Boiling Springs, N.C., Gardner-Webb University's purpose is to advance the Kingdom of God through Christian higher education by preparing graduates for professional and personal success, instilling in them a deep commitment to service and leadership, and equipping them for well-rounded lives of lasting impact, Pro Deo et Humanitate (For God and Humanity).