

Execs donate — and follow funds to final destination

BY ED SEALOVER

DENVER BUSINESS JOURNAL

PhilanthroTravel is a new type of travel for business executives, taking them right to where their charitable donations will be applied and enabling them to see the value of their giving.

The Centennial company, which operates exclusively for Project C.U.R.E., has taken four groups of business and community leaders since May 2008 on trips to assess the needs of Cuban hospitals to which the nonprofit organization contributes.

It will guide a 20-person contingent, organized by the South Metro Denver Chamber of Commerce, through Project C.U.R.E. facilities in Belize early this year and is examining Third World locations such as Haiti or Ethiopia for future excursions.

Travelers must raise at least \$2,000 to donate to Project C.U.R.E. and then cover their own trip expenses, which run around \$3,000 for a week, said Leanna Clark, executive director of PhilanthroTravel. For that healthy sum, they sometimes stay in substandard lodging, but they also help evaluate medical facilities that have requested donations and meet with area government officials.

Such a "vacation" sounds unusual regarding what well-heeled business and community leaders are willing to pay to do in their spare time, Clark acknowledged. But it also takes advantage of a recent trend of vacations designed around volunteering opportunities, and could be seen as a new model for nonprofits looking to increase funding by offering donors the chance to travel overseas and see where their money is going.

"It's sort of taking voluntourism and



KATHLEEN LAVINE | BUSINESS JOURNAL

Leanna Clark, executive director of PhilanthroTravel, and Doug Jackson, president of Project CURE.

turning it up a notch for a higher-end business community," said Clark, the former co-owner of Denver's Schenkein public-relations firm who sold her share of the business and started PhilanthroTravel after taking a trip to Cuba with Project C.U.R.E. She's also executive director of Denver's IMA Foundation. "The recession has changed us as a people in many ways. And one of those is that, as you look to be value-conscious, you are also more conscious of your values. ... I think people will continue to want to give back when

they travel."

Founded 22 years ago, Project C.U.R.E. collects medical supplies, stores them in its Centennial warehouse and then ships containers to impoverished hospitals and clinics in 123 countries. Many of the facilities have no other access to modern equipment or even sterile instruments. Douglas Jackson, a former attorney, took over the organization from his father in 1997 and now oversees shipment of two or three semi-trailer-sized containers each week.

Project C.U.R.E. is unique in that officials, before sending equipment, insist upon visiting each facility and ensuring donations won't be misappropriated. When Jackson discovered the group's humanitarian license allowed it to take as many as 10 people on the trip to inspect the facilities in Cuba, he and Clark organized the first group of donors and community leaders to go.

Since then, its three trips have sold out quickly, and even out-of-towners have clamored to get available spots, Clark noted.

Future excursions will include more than 10 travelers each because their numbers aren't dictated by government regulations. But they'll continue to offer unique small-group experiences, such as an audience with Belize's first lady, Clark said.

John Brackney, president of the South Metro chamber, jumped at the opportunity to organize participants for a getaway. That's because he saw it as a way for business leaders to give back and for travelers to bond in a way that years of lunches and cocktail mixers couldn't offer.

"Our intent is to get people to really get to know other executives in Colorado

so that when there's a need to relocate a business or keep a business here, or there's a common goal in public policy that we need to push, they can pick up the phone and really know each other," Brackney said. "There's really no better way to do that than to spend some quality time together."

The trips have appealed to business people wanting to give back, especially in a period of economic suffering, several participants said.

One was John Sheridan, owner of San Marco Petroleum Inc. of Denver. He had no affiliation with Project C.U.R.E. but wanted to see Cuba. Now he's raising \$20,000 from business friends to send another container of equipment there.

"Let's face it: I'm not a doctor; I'm a businessman. What can I do to help Cuba other than philanthropy?" said Sheridan, who also owns commercial real estate in the Denver area. "A businessman has a problem and he solves it. I think more than many other occupations, that's what we do for a living: We solve problems. So, why can't we solve problems and save lives?"

But noting how PhilanthroTravel has helped Project C.U.R.E. — Clark estimates the group has sent \$4 million in medical supplies to Cuba with donations from the trips alone — participants also say this sort of travel could become a model for other nonprofits.

Christine Benero, president/CEO of Mile High United Way, who went on the January 2009 Cuba trip, said organizations that can take funders overseas to see the fruits of their work are likely to receive similar participation in future trips and see similar benefits.