Wayne State University and the Department of Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation – Oakwood are known for physicians who excel in bringing health and healing to their patients. The residency program staff includes the example of such a generous physician, found in the gifts and skills of Dr. Pierre Rojas, a first year resident (PGY-I) who recently spent his winter break with his wife, Claudia Rojas, who is an ObGyn resident, on a volunteer medical mission trip to San Pedro de Macoris, Dominican Republic. Dr. Rojas joined a team of 15 based out of Toledo, Ohio and surrounding areas who packed up medical supplies and pharmaceuticals and traveled to bring vital medical care to those in need. The group of physicians who volunteer their medical skills began doing these mission trips to Latin America in 1979. Based out of the Mercy Health Care system in Toledo, Ohio, the Midwest Regional Mission Team spends a week each winter and travels from the airport in Santo Domingo by bus to reach out to the poor in the community, providing them with surgical and medical treatments which are not readily available to the local people. The volunteer medical mission team consisted of a gynecologist, a general surgeon, an anesthesiologist, an ObGyn resident, a nurse anesthetist, a student nurse anesthetist, a physician assistant, two scrub nurses, two recovery nurses, three circulators, a Spanish-expert volunteer, and Dr. Rojas.

From left to right: Dr. Linares, Drs. Claudia and Pierre Rojas, and Dr. Chelik
The Midwest Regional Mission Team traveled to the Dominican Republic on February 15-23, 2013 and performed a total of 40 surgeries during their mission, which mostly consisted of hysterectomies, cystectomies, cholecystectomies, and hernia repairs. Patients were triaged for their medical procedures when the medical mission physician group arrived at the state hospital, Dr. Antonio Musa Regional Hospital, about a 150-bed hospital equipped with four operating rooms. While not a faith based group, the team performs the vital mission of sending healthcare providers out to Latin America in service to people. Members of the team who travel on medical missions enhance their clinical skills in ways they do not often get to experience back in the United States. One of those ways is in the art of communication, in the doctor-patient relationship. Being a first generation Colombian-American, Dr. Rojas’ first language was Spanish, so he was a special asset in communicating with patients on the mission trip. Dr. Rojas shared that he learned significantly from his patients while in the Dominican Republic. “I had been there twice before, I knew the country pretty well, and I identified a lot with the people. My family had to go through a similar life before coming to the States.” When asked why he spent his vacation time on a volunteer medical mission trip, Dr. Rojas eagerly smiled and shared, “I wanted to give back to a population and culture that means so much to me and that I love. It was like being home away from home.”

Dr. Rojas recommends that every resident have the opportunity during their clinical training to do a medical mission trip of this nature. The mission trip allowed him to experience a broader world in the field of medicine which he described as, “You step back and see how other people live, how health care is different in other countries. It makes you a better person, a better physician. It helps you not take things for granted.” Dr. Rojas’ reflection upon his experience included a deeper appreciation for the medical resources available here in the United States. “As physicians and patients, we have all of this technology, labs, imagining, and medicine. Not everyone in the world has that luxury. You become better clinically. You think about the patient more because the care is simplified.” Dr. Rojas describes the difference in medical care while involved on a medical mission trip as “more human” because of the limited amount of medical resources available to the local people. This nurtures another level of human interaction with the patient. The communication back and forth between doctor and patient is more intimate. “For the most part, patients in Latin America are incredibly grateful and appreciative of the care they are being provided. They may view you as an extension of their family and may express their appreciation with hugs, homemade food, or blessings, for example. And while they may not have much, the efforts are genuine,” relates Dr. Rojas.

Dr. Rojas contemplates going back on another mission trip in the future, this time in the field of physiatry, after he hones and perfects and new skill set as a physical medicine and rehabilitation resident. He has his heart set on making a return to another country he knows well, Costa Rica, and offering his services to a pediatric orphanage in need of a physiatrist. Other residents who might consider the opportunity to practice medicine with a mission can learn from Dr. Rojas’ experience, enhance their clinical practice, and develop skills in communication, empathy, and generosity, which are all so essential to the doctor-patient relationship.