

Fight On State MAG PROFILE: Stefen Wisniewski



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A free preview of our next magazine, which highlights Penn State athletes giving back. This story is about the Nittany Lion football player who spent his spring break doing missionary work.

Now that the holiday weekend is here, we felt it was the perfect time to preview the next issue of FOS The Magazine. In this edition, we focus on many current and former Penn State athletes who are giving back to the community through charitable work. Below is our feature on Stefen Wisniewski. The magazine, which will be available in a couple of weeks, also has stories on Aaron Maybin, Lee Rubin, Scott Shirley, Brian O'Neal and much more.

HEADLINE: A Heavenly Spring Break

SUBHEAD: [Penn State](#) All-Big Ten center [Stefen Wisniewski](#) had a spiritual experience on his March mission to the Dominican Republic

BYLINE: Mark Brennan

There is nothing particularly unique about a college student spending spring break at a Caribbean nation known for wonderful weather, pristine beaches and inexpensive lodging. Thousands and thousands of kids do it every year.

This year, Penn State All-Big Ten football center Stefen Wisniewski was one of them, flying to the Dominican Republic for his break. He didn't head to the island nation to party and soak up the sun, though.

“I had some fun on spring break, too, but it wasn't on a beach,” Wisniewski said with a smile. “It was on a mission trip. I was in a town called Hato Mayor down there and had a blast. We did a bunch of different things -- planted trees for a village, we made them a chicken coop so they could raise chickens. We actually passed out 250 pairs of shoes. ... We just went door to door talking to people sharing the gospel, and overall it was an awesome experience.”

The March 6-13 trip was organized by the Erie-based



Christian group Meeting God in Missions. Last summer, Wisniewski made his first mission trip to the Dominican, along with his father, former Penn State and NFL defensive lineman Leo Wisniewski. Stefen's uncle and Leo's brother, former Lion All-American and NFL All-Pro Steve Wisniewski, was also on that trip, along with his son, Cole.

They were so touched by what they saw on the first visit they knew they had to do it again. Though this recent trip was comprised mostly of college students on spring break, Leo and his wife, Cindy, went along, too. So did Stefen's younger sister Sarah, who is also a student at Penn State.

This was Leo's fourth mission and he plans to continue making multiple trips per year.

“There is a great joy in doing this,” he said. “It's just a blessing. You can't help but go your first time and think you're giving something of value to people who have very little. Not that you are thinking of that in an arrogant way -- it just happens to be the normal mind-set. Then after your first trip, you are so blown away by how blessed YOU are, seeing Christ in the faces of the children and people, and the way God meets you in that experience.”

The Wisniewski family lives in Pittsburgh. So how did it end up being involved with mission trips to the Dominican?

Leo is part of the leadership team of the Steel City-based Christian men's group White Fields Foundation, which was founded in 2007 by another former Penn State football player, Brennan Gaertner. The original idea was to organize men of faith to help mentor fatherless boys in inner-city Pittsburgh. But the scope quickly grew to include helping kids and serving the poor, as well as focusing on men strengthening their marriages and families through faith.

When the leadership team at White Fields learned of Meeting God in Missions, it seemed like a natural partnership. So the trips were arranged through Kim Constanza, the director of U.S. and Dominican church outreach at MGM.

“We feel it is a great partnership,” Leo said. “We collaborate with them to take men who are involved with our work, and their families, to be part of these trips. It is a natural fit.”

Hato Mayor is actually the name of a Dominican province and the provincial capital. The town is roughly 65 miles away from Santa Domingo, and the province is known for its farming.

Though the area itself is not necessarily poor when compared to the rest of the Dominican Republic, the Haitian refugees who work in the sugarcane fields have very little.

“These are people who are living in tremendous poverty, people whose houses are just nothing and made of tin,” Stefen said. “These are people who eat one meal a day. It just blows your mind. We weren't living in the terrible conditions; we were staying at a mission house. But we were out in the sugarcane villages and around the poverty, and it really breaks your heart.”

“They come over as refugees and they live in poor barrios out in the sugarcane fields,” Leo

added. "They work for two dollars per day in the cane fields owned by the Dominican government. They're very poor, very meager. Most of them live in very small -- maybe 10 foot by 10 foot -- single-room type of huts. They have tin roofs, block walls. Most of them have no heating or electricity."

Even little things mean a lot to these folks. Last fall, Leo and Stefen stopped by Rapid Transit, a clothing store in downtown State College. When they told owner Terry Losch about the poverty they saw on their trip to the Dominican earlier that summer, he asked how he could help.

He ended up donating more than 250 pair of shoes, and they were handed out during the spring break mission.

"The people were overjoyed," Leo said. "They were very thankful. A lot of the men, if they've got shoes to wear, they're often really old and very torn up. Or they have rubber boots. If you could imagine working a whole day in the hot sun in rubber boots. So the men, they were ecstatic about getting a nice pair of running shoes, basketball shoes or even the more high-tech hiking shoes. They were very nice."

While the adults loved the shoes, the children in the area seemed to have a different focus -- Stefen. At 6-foot-3, 300 pounds, he is, as Leo called him, "a true giant when among the Dominican people." Apparently a friendly giant, too. The kids took great joy in climbing all over him as if he were some sort of living playground ride.

He also drew squeals of laughter by tossing the children high into the air only to catch them and place them safely back on the ground.

"That's kind of become his trademark," Leo said. "They all line up, and he tosses them. We were joking about him getting a great total body workout by firing those kids into the air and catching them."

For Stefen, the highlight of the trip was making so many new friends. The traveling party consisted of 42 people, including 35 college students (most of them from Pitt) and seven adult supervisors. In all, they reached out to about 400 locals during the week. Stefen said he was touched because "even though material-wise they have nothing, they have a relationship with Jesus Christ, and that's enough to have tremendous joy in their



It was an exciting experience to explore a village without electricity and to see the people who live there. The people were very poor, very meager. Most of them live in very small -- maybe 10 foot by 10 foot -- single-room type of huts. They have tin roofs, block walls. Most of them have no heating or electricity.



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That spirit even crossed language barriers.

One day, Stefen and four other students were going door to door when they met a man named Roberto. He invited them into his modest home. They talked through a translator, and as time went on Roberto's children and even some neighbors stopped by to see what was happening. When Roberto told Stefen he wanted to accept Christ as his savior, the whole group broke out in prayer.

“So I was praying in English, our translator was translating, and seven or eight people -- including this guy Roberto -- were praying in Spanish,” Stefen recalled. “It was just awesome, and I'm never going to forget that. This guy was so happy that we came and talked to him and told us that we are always welcome in his home.”

When Stefen thinks back to that moment -- and the entire trip -- it lends perspective to his life.

“It helps you realize how blessed you are as an American,” he said. “The things we complain about are kind of silly when you think of the problems the people are having down there.”

And when Leo thinks back to the trip, he can't help but appreciate what it meant to his son.

“My heart is blessed to see the kind of man Stef has become,” he said. “There is no question about that, I think he is growing up a lot. He's really become more focused on how he can help other people. He's got a long way to go in his maturity, but he's on a good path and I'm very thankful for that.”

For all the differences between the mission trip and an ordinary spring break vacation, there is one important similarity as far as Stefen is concerned: he can't wait to do it again.

“I might go back to the same place or go somewhere else,” he said. “But I certainly will be going on more missions in the future.”

Learn more about Meeting God in Missions at meetinggodinmissions.com. Learn more about White Fields Foundation at whitefieldsfoundation.org.