

John D. O'Bryant School of Math & Science
TAG Student Club
Team Munoz 2010
April Vacation: April 19th to April 26th 2010

Paul Pitts-Dilley
Mary Simon
Betsy Lazo
Viana Reyes
Cynthia Ortiz
Jessical Sandell
Margret Dragondon
Iris Lapaix
Yareliz Diaz
Christin Luna Pereyra
Argenis De Los Santos
Stanley Pena
David Mejia
Edward Quintanilla
Darena Mercedez

“Angels Sent From God”

Dear O’Bryant, GP and Quest family, community and friends:

12 TAG (Talented & Gifted Latino Students) students spent their April vacation in the Dominican Republic working in 3 local “bateys” in Munoz near the major tourist city of Puerto Plata, Dominican Republic.

Haitians have been moving to the other side of Hispaniola to work as migrant workers in the sugar cane fields for nearly $\frac{3}{4}$ of a century. Although the sugar cane economy has collapsed, some Haitians continue to move to the Dominican Republic due to Haiti’s poor economy (pre and post the massive earthquake disaster).

Living in the “bateys” is quite a physical and psychological struggle for the locals and it could be easily described as a living nightmare. The majority of the local children are not allowed to go to the local public schools, because they either do not have a valid birth certificate or because they cannot afford the mandatory school uniforms. The Dominican government challenges many of the children’s citizenship (although many are 3rd or 4th generation Dominican). As a result, most kids go to local Haitian churches where they receive a less than adequate education. The children and the adults are discriminated and deprived of basic human rights, because of the color of their skin and their ethnicity:

- There is a lack of clean water
- There is no electricity during the day
- Some children have parasites and constant diarrhea
- Although there is emergency medical care available, the local population cannot afford any prescribed medication or routine visits
- Dental problems are widespread
- Most adults do not have work permits because they cannot afford to pay for them
- Those who have work permits can go up to 4 years without working
- Most people considered to be Haitians by the Dominican government do not have Haitian citizenship either
- Children born in the Dominican Republic soil of undocumented immigrants are not given Dominican citizenship
- Prostitution is often the only “job” available for many young women

We spent our first 2 days meeting the local population and local mayor. We were presented with a number of requests and some people were yelling at our local contact in Munoz, because we were “refusing” to help them. The children would greet us and then ask for money and some children even called me a “bad” man for not giving them five Dominican pesos. When we were ready to begin our first project, one of the two men who agreed to help us (we had great intentions and some funds, but most of us had never

done any construction work) started to yell at us and demand 3,000 pesos (5 months worth of wages) for helping us dig ditches that would divert water away from the main entrance to one of the “bateys” and enable the kids to walk in a dry area (most kids were always barefooted).

The local people were not “bad” people. When people are deprived of basic necessities and their human potential, they seldom look or think about the big picture. People who live under these conditions only think about the immediate future such as in what am I going to feed my children today. It is important to know that not all is despair. The sense of community provided by the Haitian churches and volunteers from places such as Sun Camp and Engineers without Borders is a clear example of the power of the human spirit and community service.

Little by little, we managed to get people to help us and by default helping themselves by talking to them and breaking the “gringo” stereotype (they were really surprised that most of us could speak Spanish). Our willingness to go to people’s houses and to get to know their stories helped us bond. The talks that our students like Argenis De Los Santos, David Mejia and Stanley Pena had with the local community describing how hard we worked to raise the funds to be able to get there, broke many stereotypes and barriers. In the second day we had one person help us. By our last day we had over a dozen and the only thing we paid for was 100 pesos per person per day to help them pay for lunch and feed their families.

We were able to do a great number of things:

- Teach English classes to young women
- Teach Spanish and math classes at the Haitian Church schools
- Rebuild an entire house
- Buy enough tin to replace the corroded roofs of 2 elderly women’s homes
- Pave the front and back entrances of the community center
- Fix the back door entrance of the community center
- Clean up and fix the community Center’s septic tank
- Begin building an outdoor bathroom for the community center
- Lead afterschool activities for the local children (sports and arts & crafts)
- Buy and install a water tank for the community center
- Fix the leaking problems that lead to the accumulation of water in the entrance to one of the “bateys” and dig and pave ditches to divert water away from the entrance

We were able to “plant the seeds” for the community to begin working as a whole to help them help themselves. If we donate money, the money will eventually be spent. If we donate clothing, the clothing will wear off. If we inspire and empower people to work together to critically think about the root causes of poverty and oppression, people will awaken from “Dante’s Inferno” and work together to fight for a more democratic and just society, where people are not being deprived of basic human rights and dignity.

The TAG students were outstanding ambassadors of hope and as a few local ladies put “angels sent from god, angeles enviados por dios”. Viana Reyes and Cynthia Ortiz (TAG president), our 2 seniors, were the key role models for the group. Our youngest member, my roommate and Lady Ga Ga superfan, Christin Luna Pereyra (9th grade), grew as a student and as a young man. Jessica Sandell, Darena Mercedez and Margret Dagondon (juniors) could not understand why there was so much poverty next to so many luxurious hotels and made amazing connections with the younger children. Edward Quintanilla (junior) made all of us laugh during very humid and hot days of hard work.

Yareliz Diaz (our new TAG president) cried as she was presenting tables that we made for a local single mom. When we arrived, this struggling single parent and her children did not have a bed, table or shelves in her shack. She was cooking on the floor (small gas tank next to where the kids played when we got there. We were able to give her 2 small gifts and we were also able to inspire the mayor to buy her a mattress.

I am very proud of taking part of this service learning project with the 12 TAG students and Ms. Mary Simon and Ms. Betsy Lazo. We did not have 12 students and 3 educators. We had 15 leaders! 15 leaders who literally gave the shirts off their backs to the local people on their way back home as several of us paid to get our clothes washed and donated shirts, shorts and sneakers! We need more students in our school and city to learn via service projects. Thanks to places such Quest Adventures, Higgs Tickets, Top Star Tickets, Baseball Tavern, John D’ O’Bryant school staff, B Good restaurants and TAG UMASS.

These service learning trips allow our students to work and serve others and travel and learn the word and the world (Freire). Not the world of 5 star hotels, but the real world where people struggle to cope with poverty. As Iris Lapaix, an amazing young women and junior at our school pointed out: “My mom and my family are Dominican and I have been to the Dominican Republic before. However, I have never seen this part of the Dominican Republic!” Next year, TAG O’Bryant will be raising funds to send clothing, shoes and used laptops to our friends at Munoz.

VIDEO: <http://suncampdr.com/videos/firstday.html>

Paul Pitts-Dilley

History Teacher & TAG Advisor

John D. O’Bryant School of Math & Science

STUDENT REFLECTIONS:

Jessica Sandell: Junior

My trip to Dominican Republic is one that I will never forget and will forever cherish. When I first arrived I didn't know what to think, everything was such a big change. I walked around in complete shock, kids were walking around naked, or barefooted, and the ground had trash everywhere. This is so different from home. When I started to see all the help that people desperately needed I just wanted to drop everything and begin to make a change. I knew the time I had to do everything was limited and we as a team couldn't do everything they wanted us to and needed but we knew we were going to do everything we could possibly do with the materials we had and money. As a team we made a difference in that little city in Puerto Plata, we made a difference in a old ladies life by building her a new house and also new furniture for another lady it brought then into tears. All the things we did building the water tank, to teaching people English and putting smiles on everyone's faces. The kids loved us too and didn't want us to leave. I know before I said that it was a complete change from home that everything was on the poor side but the people there were the most thankful and grateful people I will ever meet in my life and they will forever stay in my heart and mind. I feel that this trip made me appreciate everything I have in my life and everything my country has to offer for me and my family also. I just wanted to take the time to thank everyone who allowed me to go on this trip it was an experience of a lifetime. I feel that I have grown as a person and the group has grown as a big family. The accomplishments we have made in this small city in Munoz will forever stay in the eyes and hearts of everyone there and I'm glad to have made a huge change and I'm thankful to be part of it. The smiles and tears of joy on Everyone's faces when they seen the hard work we have done was priceless and the feeling it gave me and the team will never leave us. Thank you again.

Stanley Pena: Sophomore

Our experience in the Dominican Republic was incredibly unexpected. Having family in the Dominican Republic, I have seen the poverty and suffrage the people their faces each day, but this was nowhere close. The people in Muñoz were by far in a different their own category of poverty. Seeing the children running around without shoes on their feet, the girls my age with children of their own hanging from their arms, and homes where the floor consisted of boulders and dirt. This was like nothing I have ever seen before. Although I knew there were parts of the world that lived in these conditions, I don't think I could ever prepare myself to see them.

Compared to the world those children lived in, we here in the United States have everything we could ever dream of. We have clean water, we have electricity, and a sufficient amount of food and clothes. That is all we really need in order to survive. The majority of people around us take these for granted, while those children in Muñoz would do anything for it. That is what was most life changing for me, seeing the reactions of the children when those little things were given to them.

The smiles on the faces of the children made all of the hard work worth while. Knowing that we helped make their lives a little bit better each day made everything worth it. A small bag a water worth less then one dollar brought joy to them as much as a

new bathroom did. Playing a game of kickball together gave them as much gratification as did getting new clothing. If I can take anything from this trip and this experience it would be the smiles we put on the faces of the children. Those smiles taught me to be grateful for everything I have and have ever had. Also, to appreciate the little things in life. If I ever get the opportunity to return and help these children again, I would in a heartbeat. This experience meant a lot to me.

Viana Reyes: Senior

To start to write my experience on the trip to Munoz, Puerto Plata, D.R., I begin by saying that for me this was the most amazing experience I've ever had, because on this trip I learned many important things, things that changed some aspects of my life, change in the sense that now I know firsthand the reality of poverty affecting the majority of the Dominican Republic and Latin America. I was very pleased to give my support to the community of Muñoz and from now on whenever I can fight for this cause I will offer my help and my support.

After this trip I feel I am a new person, I feel that for me to offer my support was an act of kindness and not in vain so I will be willing to help whenever possible, this trip affected not only me, but also my other colleagues positively changing our way of thinking about doing social work tasks. Now we know more about how important it is to help, and not take simple thing like hot water, a plate of food, or even a nice bed to sleep on for granted.

Yareliz Diaz: Junior (NEW ELECTED TAG PRESIDENT)

Walking onto the plane towards the Dominican Republic I never expected to have such an amazing experience. I never expected to see such incomprehensible poverty or to be so affected by the gratitude of the people.

I remember the first day and the sadness I felt seeing all of the dilapidated houses, children with no shoes, and teenagers pregnant with kids even though they had no food to provide for them. I imagined the sadness these parents must have felt, knowing that their children would be doomed to live in these conditions for the rest of their life.

I was impacted by the smiles on the children's faces and thought to myself ignorance is bliss. These children, so young, so innocent, so inexperienced, were happy to be alive. They were happy to have the opportunity to see me and hold my hand as if I were their savior; as if they did not realize that I can only do so much. Everyday their smiles motivated me; they made me want to work harder to better their lives as much as I possibly could. I will always remember their acceptance and willingness to share all of what they have with me; their culture, their language, and their love.

While over there I was saddened and outraged to find that many of these children are fourth and fifth generation Dominican. I thought to myself, how could this be

possible? How could the government be in denial that hundreds of people live on this piece of land? How could they deny them the right to exist; to a better life? Without birth certificates these children are ghosts in the government and in the world. They can't have dreams of coming to America or to Europe and making a better life for themselves; they can't even go to school to learn basic skills. The only schools they can go to are overcrowded and underfunded, yet it is all they have. This type of blatant racism and discrimination angered me, for they are people not animals.

I believe that my breaking point, and the moment that changed my life forever is when we gave a woman a table for her things. This woman lived in one of the typical shacks with a tin roof and nothing else inside. She was forced to cook, clean, and feed her children all off of the floor of her home. Our group built her a table, painted it, and took it to her home. When we gave her the table she began to cry and with tears streaming down her face she hugged us all and said "Thank God". She pointed at the sky and repeated the phrase numerous times with a smile. While standing there I was shocked by her strong faith. I was amazed at how these people who have nothing can be sure footed in their religion and thank Him for everything. As a Christian youth this broke me down; it made me thank Him for everything he has ever given me and for allowing me to be raised in such a great environment.

Coming back from the Dominican Republic I can truly say that it was an amazing experience that taught me so many things. It taught me about the world outside my own and about myself as a person. I would be honored to have the ability to repeat this experience with others next year, so they too may have the opportunity to see a world outside their own.

Argenis De Los Santos: Junior

It was a trip that made me see life in a different aspect, a trip that forever will change the way I act. On April 19th as a group of students we departed to the Dominican Republic with plans on doing community service in a small part of the country. I being a Dominican thought that I knew most of the problems that were going on and felt prepared for what I was going to see. When we got there I saw that the reality was different and true poverty was really prevalent in my country. I felt a bit angered because it brought me embarrassment for others to see my country, which I highly talked about, in a depressing way. The community was mostly composed of Haitian immigrants and their generations following them. They were living on land that they had no ownership of, and at any point could be taken away from them. I noticed that in every society, things work based around politics and if the people do not have anybody to represent them, life will be hard for them.

The day that we started working, a conflict arise due to that people did not want to help out for free. They could not understand that in order for them to rise up, they had to help each other. We made a ditch, we repaired and built a house, we fixed a community center, and we interacted with the people and helped out in schools. After, everything was all set and done I felt as if I did not do enough. I felt like I wanted to help even more but

later on I realized that as long as I help somebody help themselves I can really do much more. This was a great experience for me because I got to see life in a different aspect. This motivates to keep on helping out and to cherish and appreciate all of the things in my life because there are a lot of people that don't have anything. Also I learned that despite not having anything, as long as they were with their families, they were happy; meaning family means a lot.

Margret Dagondon: Junior

When the plane landed in the Dominican Republic, I was completely naïve. I did not fully understand the kind of environment I was going to be exposed to for a whole week. The countless meetings the group had before the trip did not fully portray the extent of the Haitian migrants living conditions. I do not think words, nor pictures, can entirely describe the poverty I witnessed. I do not think words can entirely express the emotions I felt when I saw the children's faces. This experience exemplified what it meant to be literally "speechless." The type of world these children are brought upon is not the kind of world I see. To be completely legally nonexistent in your place of birth is unjust. To wake up in the morning and worry about your meal for the day is unimaginable—food, for me, is so accessible. To go to school without a pencil or a notebook sounds surreal. Even the lack of the lightest of necessities—deodorant, lotion, Q-tips, etc.—sounded surreal to my ears. Despite of all the fundamentals they're lacking, they still carry an optimistic attitude. The children of the baté were always smiling and playing with each other. They did not make their current living conditions a burden in their lives.

Looking back to my experience, I have grown so much. I am very grateful to have all the opportunities I have and will be given. I am grateful that I am living in a home where I can take a shower and use the bathroom. I am grateful for everything. When I look at most of the people I see that are not very humble, I just automatically think of the children of the bate and picture how happy they would be if they were just given a piece of candy. When I look at the people who have not experienced what I have experienced, it makes me want to take them over to Puerto Plata and show them what I saw. When I attempt to explain what I felt and the Haitian migrants living conditions, they say they understand but their facial expression interprets the reciprocal. I almost feel as if I am being selfish for not being able to share my experiences. I want people to be aware of some of the living conditions people are in outside of their comfort zone. Through this opportunity, I have become a better person morally. My vision of the world has become larger. I would love to go back to the baté and see how they are doing. I would love to go to other countries and help at least one person in need. Traveling the world and learning and helping different cultures has become one of my future goals.

Iris Lapaix: Junior

Going to Dominican Republic is like walking up the street to the corner. I visit the Dominican Republic often, but I usually go to Bani or Bocacanasta and spend my days with the family or friends. I would go to the park or parties in the evening and wake up

by noon with lunch already being served, but when I went to Dominican Republic during April vacation it was completely different than the usual visit. While Diana (owner of Suncamp) was driving us towards the village I saw this sign welcoming everyone and they had two roosters.

By looking at the colorful roosters, I knew there was going to be a warm welcoming by the people and children. Helping the kids in the village which they called the Baté was a wonderful experience. I remember they were giving us a tour of the Baté and all I saw were kids running towards us speaking Creole and their faces were wide open observing the new people. I remember also, there was this one little kid named Alejandro! Each time I came to the Baté, he would spot me out and I would give him a special warm hug. Then in school I went to help and teach these four intelligent children that were named Denisa, Bechi, Freddy, and Senti. I taught them to carry the number when adding or take from the neighbor when subtracting. I felt good inside every time I high fived the kids because they had finished their problems at the board.

While we were in Muñoz, Puerto Plata, all of TAG (our after-school program) had helped build: a bathroom, a water system, a white (painted) three layered shelve, (reconstructed) a 70 year old lady's home, a roof to another elderly lady's home and a ditch for the community of the Baté. It doesn't sound like much but the little that we did will help in the long run.

This experience was life changing because it opened my eyes to the other side of Dominican Republic, the side I had never seen before. I also saw the poverty that Dominican Republic actually has. I felt proud of myself and my group for all the hard work we did from entertaining the children so they wouldn't go near the construction to the clean up of the entrance of the Baté. I would like to thank Diana for having us in her home, the sponsors for helping us with donations, Mr.Pitts-Dilley, Ms. Simon, Ms. Lazo and anyone else who made this possible. Thank you for this great adventure.