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MLB Dominican Republic's Rafael Pérez A Hit At DRSEA Reading Program

Rafael Pérez, Director of Dominican Operations for Major League Baseball, has developed a reputation over the years for his keen eye and protective nature with regards to young baseball prospects in the Dominican Republic.

Pérez revealed another side of himself recently when he sat down to read aloud to a group of Dominican grade schoolers, quickly gaining their rapt attention as they hung on his every word.

The event was part of the Dominican Republic Sports & Education Academy's reading program, a collaboration with Children International that sends people into Dominican communities to read to children.



Rafael Pérez

In both Cuba and the Dominican Republic, the cigar industry has long employed readers to entertain the cigar rollers while rolling and cutting the tobacco leaves. The *lector* reads aloud from newspapers and novels to help while away the hours. The readings came to be regarded as a social and cultural right, and spurred many cigar rollers to learn to read, and also to social activism.

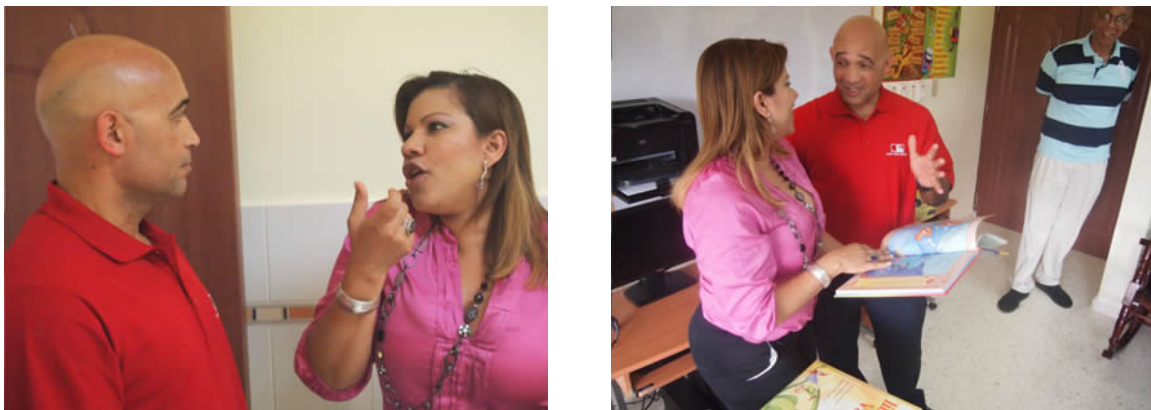
Children International programs benefit over 340,000 poor children and their families in 11 countries around the world, including Chile, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, India, Mexico, the Philippines, Zambia and the United States.

Pérez was the first head of operations at Major League Baseball’s office in the Dominican Republic when it opened in 2000; while there, he established standards for all MLB academies in the country. His oversight of Major League Baseball operations in the Dominican Republic ended when he left for the New York Mets in 2005.

With the Mets, Pérez was responsible for the team’s operations in the Dominican Republic and Venezuela, coordinating the Winter Leagues, and developing an international education program as well as special international projects. He returned to his original post in the Dominican Republic a few months ago.

Pérez has long understood the value of education. After graduating from high school in the Dominican Republic, he went to Chipola Junior College in Marianna, FL, transferring to the University of South Alabama where he finished his college baseball career while obtaining a degree in accounting. He then played for two seasons in the Pittsburgh Pirates organization. After a stint with an international software company, Pérez became a consultant with the Toronto Blue Jays, advising players on transitioning to playing baseball in the United States.

Prior to the reading event, Sonia Betances Lora, national director for Children International in the Dominican Republic, gave Perez a tour of the community center in Boca Chica, complete with dental and medical facilities, a computer room, arts and crafts, a library, and, of course, a baseball field. But the group of children – eager for the reading – quickly took center stage, and Pérez did not disappoint.



Rafael Pérez and Sonia Betances Lora

With a room full of what surely are at least a couple of potential baseball stars, Pérez immediately grabbed their interest by invoking the national pastime, soliciting responses for favorite teams and favorite Dominican stars. “Yankees! Cincinnati! Cubs! Pedro Martinez! Alex Rodriguez! Albert Pujols!” The passion for baseball among Dominicans is evident even at a young age.

Sitting in a rocking chair, Pérez read from a Disney book entitled *Aprendo a Leer Con Los Cuentos* (Learn To Read Stories), complete with questions pertaining to what he read. Hands flew in the air as the children clamored to respond, their imaginations fueled by the characters Pérez brought to life.



Pérez prepares to read to Dominican children

While it was more than evident that the children were enthralled with Pérez' oration, he later admitted his own delight. "I realized how much I enjoyed doing things like that," he said. "I also realized that I need to take the time every so often to participate more in activities like that one."

Pérez also proved that hitting a home run is not always reserved for the baseball field.





Getting into the moment



Working the audience



Pérez, flanked by Sofia Betances Lora and Evelyn Peña Troncoso. I join them on the right



Reading is FUNdamental

Photos: Emery Graham

The first DRSEA reading program was in September 2009 and has since been held several times in Santo Domingo and Santiago. To support the program, send donation to **DRSEA, 600 Anita Street #16, Chula Vista, CA, 91911**. To donate school supplies: **Charles S. Farrell/DRSEA, EPS X-25801, 8260 NW 14th Street, Doral, FL 33126**.

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