



DRSEA INFORMER

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Noche En Santo Domingo II (Santo Domingo Night II) – I am recently back from the USA where we held a fundraiser for the DRSEA in New York on January 27. And while the people who did attend enjoyed the event immensely, and the networking that occurred was beneficial, we fell far short of our goal financially.

This certainly was, in part, a reflection of the economy. Many of the people who supported the event last year were very straight up with saying they simply could not afford to attend this year. Some have lost their jobs, others their spouse did, many have children in college; believe me, I understand.

One of the things I am trying to do with the **DRSEA INFORMER** is enlist support for the venture by having people understand the relevance of the project and the need for them to get involved. While money is and will be a necessity for the DRSEA to become a reality, there are many ways you can help us even if only with suggestions of others you think might want to get involved.

Please send me an e-mail voicing your opinions and thoughts about the DRSEA (www.drsea.org) as we want you to view this as your project as much as ours. In the meantime, if you can send a donation, we would be grateful. As a non-profit organization, the DRSEA is dependent on contributions to help the bottom line. Yes, these are difficult economic times, but even the smallest donation will help. A donation form is attached for your convenience.



El Hombre En El Espejo (The

Man In The Mirror) - As I sat watching all the festivities and celebrations surrounding the inauguration of Barack Obama as President of the United States of America, I went through a wide range of emotions. Great pride over the election of an African American to the presidency of a country that only 55 years ago still enforced segregation. Sadness that my dad is not here to witness this. Envy that I *was not* in Washington, DC, to be part of the fanfare. Relief that I was not in Washington to be a part of the madhouse that ensued from the 3 million people who descended on the nation's capital. And, I am still marveling over how the rest of the world, particularly people of color, is embracing Obama's achievement, claiming it as their own.

Here in the Dominican Republic, not a day goes by without seeing someone with Obama's likeness on their T-shirt, or people walking up, asking if I am American, and saying simply, "Obama," with a wide smile on their face. While Obama is an international phenomenon, his celebrity seems to have an even greater impact in places like the Dominican Republic.

One reason I think this is true is that the faces I see in Santo Domingo are not unlike the faces I see in Washington, DC, North Philadelphia, South Side Chicago, Liberty City, Compton, East St. Louis, and in 8 Mile. They are the faces of the African Diaspora, the descendents of the greatest forced migration in human history when their forbearers were torn from their homes and relocated to the Americas to harvest cotton, sugar, tobacco, coffee and rice. And, the majority of these people ended up, not in the United States, but in the Caribbean or in South and Central America. Of the 12 million to 13 million Africans transported during the brutal slave trade, Brazil alone imported more than five million. This history of slavery is not the United States' alone to bear, but that of most of the Western Hemisphere, and the Dominican Republic is a direct reflection of that, a reality that I think is sometimes overlooked.

I had a friend tell me a couple of years ago that he only donated to causes that supported black children and therefore couldn't make a donation to the DRSEA. I felt then, as I feel now, that he missed something in his evaluation of history, that somehow people in the Dominican Republic, in Haiti, in Cuba, in Jamaica, in Brazil, don't have a black heritage even though there is an indisputable link between African Americans and people in those countries.

My ex-girlfriend, who is Dominican, when asked her ethnicity, would tell you she is African Caribbean; ask her nationality and it is Dominican. I think she had a true understanding of her roots and how her people are intertwined in the history of the Americas, not just the history of the United States of America. Black comes in many shades and complexities and speaks many languages.

As people all over the world, and especially people of color, embrace the Obama presidency, they should do so with a more complete understanding of the history that unites them, of the tapestry they are a part of. It should make us all even more proud of this “Yes We Can” moment that is reflected in the faces of people in Santo Domingo, in Rio, in Havana, in Kingston, in Port-a-Prince, as we saw a black man become what many consider to be the most powerful person in the world, and that world will never be the same.

I am hoping that my friend who said he only supported the causes of black children, and people who think likewise, will reconsider that position. We have to understand that people in the Dominican Republic earned the right to share in the jubilation of the election of President Obama because Dominicans who look just like him share in the pain and sorrow of the past.

“What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility — a recognition, on the part of every American, that we have duties to ourselves, our nation, and the world, duties that we do not grudgingly accept but rather seize gladly, firm in the knowledge that there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character, than giving our all to a difficult task.” – Inauguration address of President Barack Obama

Reflexiones (Reflections) – Throughout my life, I have been blessed to see and/or meet a cadre of people who have had great distinction in the world and in history, from presidents, to kings, famous actors, musicians and athletes. Growing up on the campus of Lincoln University was part of that unique experience where I met Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Duke Ellington, Langston Hughes, Justice Earl Warren, Roscoe Lee Brown and many others who made their impact on me, but probably none more than Muhammad Ali.

Ali came to Lincoln in the late 1960’s. I don’t remember if he was still heavyweight champion at the time, or had been stripped of his title for refusing induction into the armed services, but I remember him being larger than life, dressed in a t-shirt and jeans as he shadow boxed his way down the aisle lined with students cheering and trying just to touch him.

Years later I would meet him again, in Washington, DC, when I was a reporter and editor with *The Washington Post*, at a reception for sports legends. I am not typically in awe of people; it is just not my nature to be, but I was in awe of Ali. He was already starting to show the signs of physical deterioration, his speech affected by his years in the ring, but he was still a formidable presence as he took the time to have a short conversation with me, joking and patting me on the back and actually making me feel like I was important on a day when he and others were being recognized for their importance.

So, it was with a touch of sadness that I saw Ali on television at the Obama inauguration, the severity of his debilitations so evident. Yet his strength and dignity still shine, and his place in history secure for eternity. He went from Olympic champion to heavyweight champion, to ex champion and back to champion during one of the most tumultuous eras of U.S. history, but he will always be remembered as a man who stood by his principles and his faith to become one of the most recognized and revered people on the planet. A truly remarkable and special person.

Otras Noticias De Interés (Other News of Interest)

Educational concerns – Educational standards among students entering high school and universities in the Dominican Republic has been a topic of concern of late, with new statistics from the Education Ministry adding a new dimension to those concerns. According to the Ministry, last year a total of 178,814 students quit school. There was a 7% desertion rate for primary school and an 11% desertion rate for middle school. Francisco Yuli, director of Academic Programs for the Junior Achievement Program, says that while many children leave

school to fill economic needs at home, those who do stay are "mentally distracted." He added that students often don't study because they don't appreciate the need for an education. Yuli added that schools have now become factories and that teachers no longer teach.

Youth unemployment rate high – Although the overall unemployment rate in the Dominican Republic hovers between 16% and 18% and is considered among the highest in the region, unemployment amongst people between the ages of 15 to 24 is the highest of all the DR-CAFTA countries. According to a report released by the Ministry of Labor, youth unemployment is at 30.9%. According to the newspaper *Hoy*, the regional rate of unemployment averages about 7%. Labor Minister Max Puig said he would propose a plan of action to deal with unemployment during the 28 January political summit. Puig told *Hoy* that these labor opportunities would focus on community service and reforestation projects. The minister said there is also a plan of action involving government subsidies, which according to him have shown positive results in Argentina.

LETTERS TO THE DRSEA INFORMER:

Not really a letter, but a response to a question I have been asked many times recently: **Do you miss anything about the United States?**

I miss my friends, of course, but modern technology – e-mails and Internet phones, permit me to stay in contact with them on a regular basis, but what I do miss are:

Bagels – My standard breakfast in the U.S. was a cup of coffee and a cinnamon raisin bagel with margarine. While frozen bagels are available here, they are not the same as the fresh bagels always available in the U.S.

New York Daily News – I miss my daily English language newspaper and my paper of choice was the Daily News. Best sports section in America.

My Church – Grace Congregational Church in Harlem was an important part of my life in New York, a place I always turned to for revival of faith and spirit. There are churches here, of course, but Grace is part of my family and that is a void that can't be filled.

Charles S. Farrell

DRSEA Contact Information in the Dominican Republic

Address: Calle 19 de Marzo, #103, Suite 305, Zona Colonial, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic

Phone: 829-505-2991

Website: www.drsea.org

Please feel free to pass the **DRSEA INFORMER** on to others you feel might be interested in being updated on what we are doing or send their e-mail to including them on the mailing list. The **INFORMER** is published on a regular basis; back issues are available upon request.