



DRSEA INFORMER

Volume II, Issue 7: A Publication For Your Reading Enjoyment

El Exito Del Programa de Lectura Continúa (Reading Program Success Continues) – The second installment of the *lectora programa*, or reading program for children, was hosted recently by the Saint George School in Santo Domingo and was a complete success from top to bottom. The program, in keeping with a tradition in the cigar industry called *el lector de tabaquería*, is a collaboration of the Dominican Republic Sports & Education Academy (DRSEA) and Children International that sends people out into Dominican communities to read aloud to children.

Besides offering its students an innovative, rigorous and challenging education and a sound preparation for a worldwide post-secondary education, the goal of the Saint George School is to instill a system of values based on community service and intercultural understanding, and the reading program more than met the challenge.

Children International brought 16 of its sponsored children to Saint George and was met by Valinda Valdez, head of English Programme/ International Projects and Counseling at the school, who just happens to be the sister of DRSEA Board of Trustees member Valoree de Lebron. A commitment to education runs in the family, it seems.

Valinda gave the children and their chaperones a tour of the fantastic Saint George campus, quickly putting the children in wide-eyed amazement over the athletic facilities, the large classrooms, computer lab, and other benefits that private schools like Saint George offer.

A large meeting room served as the setting for the reading session, overseen by a group of students who obviously had gone through great lengths to prepare, as they warmly embraced their charges for the afternoon, making them feel at home. Part of the program was the intercultural understanding that Saint George emphasizes and is reflected in a student body that comes from not only the Dominican Republic but also Columbia, Venezuela, Lebanon and the United States, to name a few places. It was like giving the young visitors a geography lesson as a prelude to the reading.

Several Saint George students took turns reading from books describing pets such as dogs, cats and birds, bringing the children into the conversation to talk about their own pets. What shyness they had soon dissipated into eager chatter and boundless smiles.

Several Saint George students took turns reading from books describing pets such as dogs, cats and birds, bringing the children into the conversation to talk about their own pets. What shyness they had soon dissipated into eager chatter and boundless smiles.



Valinda Valdez with CI children



Saint George student reads to children

Then it was off to juice and crackers as the older and younger students mingled and talked and laughed together. Saint George is obviously a school for the privileged and hosting a group of underprivileged children was a unique educational opportunity for both groups to learn from each other.

The younger children were provided handfuls of books, as well a school supplies and enough candy to share with sibling back home as they piled into a van, grand smiles emblazoned on their faces, reflecting the joy of the experience.

It brought a lump to my throat because even though the process of branding the DRSEA, of nurturing the dream, is a slow process, rewards are always provided whenever children benefit, as these children did. Education will be the salvation for these underprivileged children, and exposing them to new experiences is part of that education. And, exposing Saint George students to new experiences will also better their education. Everybody wins.



Children International and the DRSEA are now plotting out the next few months of the reading program, hoping to expand it to include as many children as possible. Children International has the sites; the DRSEA is providing the readers, but we need other resources such as additional children's books and more school supplies. Donations gratefully accepted; contact me for more information.

Continuación De Educación (Continuing Education) – I also got a chance to continue my education about the Dominican Republic with a visit to another school, this one that teaches English to Dominicans. A friend of mine, Paco, teaches at the school and invited me to talk to his class, in part so they can hear someone speaking in English and could ask questions in English. Spanish is not allowed during the four-hour, five days a week classes.

Paco is a Viet Nam veteran who decided to relocate to the Dominican Republic about a year ago. I am envious at how well he speaks Spanish and he gives me something to shoot for.

The students in these classes are older, ranging from late teens to early 30's; most work or go to school for a full day before coming to class, making for a long day, so their commitment is obvious.

I had my own agenda in talking to them; I want to get an idea, from them, of how they view education, or its importance, in the Dominican Republic and I am not disappointed as I share with them my vision of the DRSEA and got their feedback. Most see education as a way to advance them, to get better jobs and therefore more money, but many see it as a way for personal improvement, to enable them to better enjoy life. "Education gives hope," one of them said. Most of them want to come to the United States, seeing it as the land of milk and honey, and English as part of the ticket there. I try to temper their verve, particularly in light of the economic situation in the United States, instead trying to have them understand that being bilingual is going to make them more marketable anywhere.



A smile is the same in any language

Instead of the one class I was invited to speak to, I end up speaking to four and spending the entire evening at the school, but I didn't mind at all since it renews my optimism about a country where education is not always valued. If these young men and women see the value of getting an education, of bettering themselves, surely there are others with similar views, and just as surely, the DRSEA will be a part of bettering them. **UN PASO MAS Y LLEGAMOS.**

Paco called me the next day, not only to thank me, but to ask if I could come back. Seems there were others classes that want me to come and visit. I have promised to return whenever I am asked.

Réquiem De Renacimiento (Renaissance Requiem) – Black-owned businesses are 10 times less likely to fail in the United States than white-owned, and such was the case with the Renaissance Cigar Emporium in Harlem, which closed recently after just a year and a half. I note its passing because not only was I a customer, I was good friends with the owner, Johnny Drake.

Johnny D and I met in passing about two years ago; I was sitting on a bench smoking a cigar when he passed by, also smoking a cigar. The exchange of pleasantries included, "What you smoking?"

I became an almost daily visitor to the Ren, frequently bringing my laptop to connect to the Internet and work surrounded by a cloud of cigar smoke. I created a monthly newsletter for the shop, and as time went on, I became more and more knowledgeable about cigars, often receiving new samples from the plethora of vendors who trekked to the store from far and wide. I even got to meet a couple of the master blenders, the experts who decide what tobacco goes into a cigar, which gave me the opportunity to discuss cigars with these geniuses.

One night, Johnny had an emergency and I was suddenly left in charge of the Ren. It is a great measure of trust when someone leaves you in charge of an inventory of several thousand dollars worth of cigars and a cash register full of the day's receipts. From that day on, I would sub for Johnny, often opening and closing the shop. What had been simply a passionate hobby was now a part-time job that really came in handy.

We had memorable parties at the shop; the monthly women's night, the various tastings, the rolling parties, and one of the best Super Bowl parties I have ever attended. The Ren was a part of my everyday life in New York, and, as a non-drinker, a place where I could feel comfortable socializing.

Today, its doors are closed, in part due to the crashed economy. Despite my arguments otherwise, cigars are a luxury, so many people cut down or cut them out. Without income, it was difficult for the Ren to put inventory on the shelves. No inventory, no customers. The end had been coming and has now arrived.

I made a beeline to the Ren when I was in New York at the end of January, maybe sensing its days were numbered. One night I sat in the place all by myself, reflecting on the memories. It was a special place, which makes its closing even sadder. I am going to go reflect more on that later with a good cigar.

Otras Noticias De Interés (Other News of Interest)

Dominicans Still Reeling Over Losses To Dutch – In what many are calling one of the greatest upsets in sports history, and one of the most embarrassing for the Dominican Republic, the Netherlands baseball team beat the Dominican Republic twice in the World Baseball Classic tournament. The loss to the unknown Dutch team eliminated the Dominicans from the WBC tournament and dashed any hopes of claiming world baseball supremacy. As the dust settles on the DR's performance in the WBC, the blame game has begun with many critics pointing to the absence of Manny Ramirez, Alex Rodriguez, Albert Pujols and Vladimir Guerrero as key reasons why the team was beaten. Others say the team was still very strong with the presence of David Ortiz, Hanley Ramirez, Jose Reyes and Alfonso Soriano. Sloppy play, lack of concentration, and poor teamwork are also being mentioned as key factors in the loss, which continues to dominate conversations.

Dominican Doctors On Strike - The Dominican Medical Association (CMD) called a second strike recently after the Senate rejected a pay raise. A 24-hour work stoppage was followed by the call for another one, this time lasting 48 hours. The announcement was made by Dominican Medical Association (CMD) president Waldo Ariel Suero who said that only emergency patients would be treated. This is the latest strike in the CMD's campaign for a wage raise for its members, but the strikes have had little success. While Congress has discussed a potential pay increase, legislators have balked at increasing taxes.

There's A Joke Here Somewhere - The career of choice for most Dominican students is still law, and Listin Diario reports that the Supreme Court of Justice (SPJ) has admitted 22,033 new lawyers since 1997. Around 20,000 students are currently studying law and 35,920 lawyers are registered with the Dominican Lawyers Association. The newspaper adds that since January 2008, 2,404 new lawyers were sworn in by the SCJ. SCJ president Jorge Subero Isa is recommending that legal academic programs should be revised and updated because the National Judicial School can't make up for the deficiencies displayed by many of these new lawyers. National District DA Alejandro Moscoso says there is a bill in Congress that seeks to require all lawyers to do an eight-month internship as part of their studies.

Young Dominicans Are Sexually Active - Dr. Luis Ernesto Feliz Baez, director of the National Department for the Control of Sexually Transmitted Diseases (DIGECITTS), is concerned that young Dominicans are becoming sexually active too early. He quotes a Program for the Education of Sexual Effects (PEAS) survey that reveals that 20% of 7th and 8th graders had already engaged in sexual activity before entering that grade. Of that 20%, 7% of students admitted to engaging in sexual intercourse with adults. The study included 40 schools and 1,800 students in nine regions.

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.