

Reflections on Trip to La Romana, Dominican Republic

Charlotte Massie

WOW... what a week, what an experience and what an eye opener. I would like to thank ~ our First Baptist Family for supporting Tom Carr and myself on our Mission Trip to La Romana, Dominican Republic.

I would like to try and share some of the past week experiences with you all. In many ways it was a week of contrasts as you will see. From the Capitol city of Santo Domingo (pop. Appox. 2 million) we rode in a "well used" school bus over hot, dusty, bumpy roads for 1-11/2 hours until we reached La Romana on the S.E. part of the Island of Hispaniola. The Dominican Republic (D.R.) makes up the Eastern part of Hispaniola and Haiti makes up the western part. We caught beautiful views of blue-green Caribbean and the waves crashing over the coral by the side of the road. But the beauty is marred by the ubiquitous trash piles. We pass by "Boreos" (slums) and then see the dramatic entrances to the posh resorts that welcome tourists worldwide.

We arrive in La Romana (pop. Appox. 500,000) and unload at "the compound" operated by the church members who are our hosts and hostesses here this week. The church is connected with the Good Samaritan Hospital which is the main hub of our activities throughout the week. . . . some of our group working on projects in the Hospital and others going out with a medical team to the Bateys. There is a kitchen area in which the church women prepare our meals, a large eating area where we gather each morning at 7 a.m. for breakfast. Outside is a cement courtyard area where our laundry is washed in large tubs. Mango trees create our roof to our courtyard and the cement walls are lined by brightly painted tropical scenes for sale by artist, Eric, a Haitian refuge and church member now studying to become a Pastor and a Lawyer.

Upstairs are two cement bunk rooms where the women stay and a bathroom area shared by about 15 women. I am thankful for camping experiences which make it easier to adjust to our living quarters for the week! I quickly get used to carrying bottled water with me for teeth brushing and using Purell after using their water for washing.

Pasqual is our guard. He sits outside our compound and watches over us. He always has a smile on his face. I understand from a translator that he is from Haiti and trying to get his family to the D.R. All too uncommon I find this with many of the men we will meet through the church this week. A man sits outside the men's compound which is around the corner and next to the church. He has a sawed off shotgun across his lap and smiles a broad grin each morning we greet him. I am told that Pasqual also carries a gun but we don't see it.

All week I am very aware of the many noises... loud music in the bus, from the adjacent homes, from the churches on almost every block (loud but joyous), the scooters zooming around the city, trucks without mufflers and roosters. Roosters.. all night long!

Sometimes we see a family of 4 on one scooter and of course no helmets! Black smoke emits from the back of automobiles and trucks... no emissions control in this country. I \ make feeble attempts of cover my mouth or wave the air in front of my face. I am told that they have lead in their gas. I step over trash in the middle of the sidewalks and am

horrified one day to see a truck pull up along the road side dumping all of its trash. I never get used to it.

Sunday morning we have our first experience going out to the "Bateys" for church services. Driving out of the city towards the Bateys is a relief to my senses. There are fields of rich black earth and next to them unending fields of sugar cane of various heights. In the distance are the beautiful mountains. Las Montanas bonita. There are approximately 150 Bateys which are the very poor communities in which the sugar cane workers and their families live. I found that the personality of each Batey was unique. Some were cleaner than others, some were friendlier than others but all by any standard are very, very poor. Our group of 23 broke into two groups to join two different Bateys for church. I got off the bus at the first Batey and we were immediately welcomed by the children. Taking hold of our hands, arms around our waists they showed us around their home often taking us to meet their Madre y Padre. (Mother and Father) With the children language never seemed to be a barrier to communication. The children pose like magazine models at one Batey and love having their pictures taken. They laugh and squeal when they view their images on the digital cameras. After our introduction we proceeded into their cement Church with open windows and benches on each side, one for the women and children and one for the men. Pastor Martin led the service, the majority of which was sung by either himself or the congregation. As their guests we were asked to share a few songs. We tried to jazz up the beat a bit and we were off key but accepted us and joined in when we started singing Amazing Grace. By the end of the service the Pastor and congregation were literally dancing in the cement aisles. Despite destitute living circumstances and conditions I am finding these to be joyful people.

Although it is Sunday the men work seven days a week all year long as long as the sugar cane factory is open. I understand it closes down for about I month for maintenance. If they don't work they don't get paid. A man earns about \$2.50 per tons of sugar cane and can cut between 3-4 tons a days. That's \$7.50-10.00 a day for back breaking work in the hot humid tropical conditions. I am told they eat only one meal a day but do have water out in the fields. As we drove down the dirt road we occasionally saw crews of men at work with their machetes. I can still see the man who watched as we passed rubbing his hand over his belly.

On Monday through Thursday I was a part of the medical team that traveled 30-60 minutes out to 4 different Bateys to provide in some cases the only medical care these people will receive all year. We saw on average 100-125 people per day. I felt like a part of a make shift MASH unit of sorts. We would set up in the church which usually was a large cement open room with benches in it. They would line up first for worm medicine follo~'ed by weight, temperature, heart rate, blood pressure and then from there they would see a Nurse, Physical Therapist, Doctor or Dentist depending on their symptoms. The Pharmacy was set up in the back and prescriptions were filled for a two week period in most cases. After that, what, I wondered? These people had a .lot of infections, scabies, high blood pressure, cold, flu, strokes, diabetes and dental issues. I was a bit surprised when I realized that the Dentist not 10 feet from me was pulling teeth. I hadn't even heard a peep from any of her patients. My heart went out to a woman who

was my age She was seeing the Dentist who found it necessary to extract both of her front teeth as she sat on the wooden bench in the corner. I wonder how she is making out now, but these people adjust and go on. They are resilient. They have no other choice. During lunch we would explore the Bateys further. A beautiful sound arose as the wind weaved its way through the sugar cane. We would walk to the lush green palms and discovered they were bamboo groves with those beautiful mountains looking so peaceful in the distance. There is so much beauty out in the Bateys. There are also cement structures with doors numbered I through 5. Behind each of these doors lives a family often of 6-8 members. One woman had a family of 17! Some of the dwellings were made of wood with scrap metal for roofs. One such roof was littered with old shoes, clothing no longer needed. I was surprised to find that some of the families had TV's and radios. These may have been the supervisors I am told. Amazing was that some even had cell phones! They are less expensive than land lines and many living in the Bateys have families in the city who may call them They can't make outgoing calls generally. Most of the sugar cane workers are Haitian who actually find the living conditions in the Bateys preferable to the life they leave behind in Haiti. There is some hope and some opportunity for them in the Bateys. For the children it is very clear that the only way out is through education. I am keenly aware of how bright and eager to learn these children are You can't help but see it in their eyes. Professor Roberto was one of the dedicated teachers I had the opportunity to meet while out in the Bateys. It is so apparent how much he loves these people. He told me how much our visit meant to him and how happy he was. He reported that it at times can become discouraging because of the conflict among some of the Voodoo beliefs and the Christian. Our visits he said lift him up and give him encouragement that God is there and loves us all. We gave Professor Robert a large bag of pencils and pens to hand out to his students and I have never seen so much joy and happiness! The children must wear a uniform and have shoes in order to attend school. This is a law in the D.R. In many cases a family will not have enough money to send all the children to school. The schools generally go through the forth grade. Many tell us they want to be Doctors, Nurses, Teachers and Pastors. One young woman I meet named Andrea had a beautiful smile. She was 19 and had no children. I asked her if she was studying and she said yes... no children I need to study. More often however young girls would come to the clinic as young as 12 and 13 already with a babe In arms.

We took bags of clothing and shoes as we traveled to the Bateys and gave the pastor the items to disperse. He would know who was in need of what. In most cases we didn't have enough for everyone in need. I won't forget a woman I saw who weighed 92 pounds, was barefoot and wore a tattered dress hanging loosely from her slight frame. She asked me for a new dress and I could only tell her "no mas" no more. It was hard to have to say those words.

T noticed that the men had extremely large hands in comparison to their limbs... A sign of years of manual labor cutting the sugar cane. One man came to me and held out his hands. Several fingers were partly missing or mangled from the machetes and he had an

open gash on one of the other fingers. I wa~ able to give him some exercises to do to restore and maintain some of the mobility in joints of his hands and then sent him over to the Doctor to treat his open wound. I heard no complaining, only thanks!

We returned each afternoon to the compound very hot, dirty and sweaty. Never before have I appreciated a cool shower sooo much. We had clean clothes to put on plenty of clean water to drink and food to eat. How lucky we all are to be able to enjoy these simple yet basic needs. It is very clear to me.

A few other highlights of our trip must be mentioned. We had the opportunity to visit an orphanage right around the comer from the Good Samaritan Hospital. It was by another Christian organization. There was a wall completely surrounding it with barb wire on top. A guard with a shotgun met us at the entranc,e to prevent kidnapping and selling of the children. Once inside we were greeted by absolutely beautiful children who appeared to be well loved and taken care of. Everything inside the orphanage was neat and clean in stark contrast to what lay outside the walls. We were blessed to be able to spend the afternoon with these children playing and just being. I met a little 4 year old boy named Jeffrey who has cerebral palsy and couldn't sit up on his own yet. I worked on his tight muscles and saw such happiness in his face when we together could raise his anus up overhead. Laughter in Creole, Spanish or English is all the same. It felt good to share laughter with these children. The young people from the church put on a puppet show for the children and Lee from our group made alJ sorts of fancy balloons for the kids. Lee has the nickname of the Pied Piper of La Romana and you will certainly see why when we get all our pictures back!

We were also invited to visit a private school in a "Boreo" of San Pedro. A Boreo is a step up from the Bateys, but not by much. When we pulled our school bus up to the , school we could hear the children chanting in anticipation of our visit. We had a great i hour or so visit and caused quite a disruption in their primitive classrooms but the Teachers were alJ good natured about it. We also found out that because money is so tight some of the Teachers will get paid one month and then the others the fo]]owing month.

So much to share but I'll start to wrap this up for now. Tom and I spoke today and we wilJ be speaking with those who are interested further during second hour Sunday May 28th. .

I:"ast Forward:... . . . We get off at the West Hartford Center exit and are greeted by the brick welcome sign and gorgeous spring flowers in bloom. There is no trash on the road side The air feels and smells clean. We pu]] into my driveway and my house looks so grand... the lawn and gardens so neat. I open the refrigerator and it is full. 1. turn on the faucet and clean water flows. Everything we have and that is available to us is so plentifiJl. I'm so grateful for this country we live in. Many of the people we met this week have nothing but they have everything. They have hope and they have the love of God in their hearts.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Amen!

."..~ ~ ~ ~ ~ "

,c+,~w~ac.~CCC"CC" c.c.,Coc+

c:~~~te~~;l::~"~-