



# DRSEA INFORMER

Volume II, Issue 1: A Publication For Your Reading Enjoyment

***Feliz Ano Nuevo!*** Happy New Year, everyone! Sorry for the delay in this issue, but the writer, editor and publisher has been a little under the weather with what the Dominicans call *la gripe*, which is basically the flu, but it kicked my butt and then some. Probably didn't help that I wore myself down some during the holidays, trying to enjoy every aspect of my first Christmas and New Years here.

Christmas was an incredibly pleasant experience. Most Dominicans celebrate *Feliz Navidad* on Christmas Eve, opening presents at the stroke of midnight, but I actually had a more traditional Christmas Day, spent with Valoree de LeBron and her family, which numbered about 25 people. Valoree, a DRSEA board member, and her husband, Ricardo, share a house in Santo Domingo with her parents, and a son lives in an attached building, so the family is very close. On Christmas Day, in addition to her parents, Arturo and Betti Valdez, there were numerous brothers and sisters, children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews. Every room in the house seemed to be filled with people and opened gifts too numerous to count.

You can read the enjoyment Valoree gets from being surrounded by family on her face. Look up *abuela* in the Spanish dictionary and I swear there is a picture of Valoree. Valoree and her family have lived in the Dominican Republic for more than 40 years; her father was in the Foreign Service. Her mother reminds me of someone who might have been a movie star back in the 40's and 50s; she has the style and glamour of someone who would have been called a screen siren back in the day. Rita Hayworth got nothing on her,

And, if her mother is Rita Hayworth, her father is Fred MacMurray, with a calm demeanor perhaps derived from raising *his* three sons as well as three daughters. He made me feel like a kid again when, after I told him when I graduated from college, he said he was probably playing college basketball in New Mexico around the time I was born. "Oh, you are just a young man," he tells me, and, at least for the moment, I am.

We had a wonderful dinner that included turkey (which, while available here, is not wildly popular), ham, mashed potatoes, asparagus, gravy, stuffing, cranberries, hot rolls, and sweet

potatoes with marshmallows. Best meal I have had since I got to the Dominican Republic, in huge part due to the company I was keeping, but also because there were so many of my favorites on the table.

I also shared with the gathering a holiday tradition of my family; eggnog based on a recipe that was my father's. Had to make it from scratch as stores here don't carry it, but it turned out pretty good, if I do say so myself. I made two batches, one without alcohol for non drinkers like myself, but I am sure the best was the spiked batch. My dad made this eggnog every Christmas and used to say, "What good is the egg without the nog?"

All in all, it was a wonderful way to spend Christmas and I thank Valoree and her family again for letting me share it with them.

New Year's was a different story! I had been warned to expect a wild night, so I started to prepare my mind days in advance. I even took a long nap in the afternoon, but turns out that no amount of preparation is adequate.

We started about 10 at night at the home of my friend Jose, sitting along the street, watching kids setting off firecrackers and sparklers. The usual dominoes games were going on and it seemed pretty tame to me. Jose said, "Just you wait."

At precisely the stroke of midnight, people emptied into the streets, laughing, hugging, kissing, and wishing each other, and me, *Feliz Ano*. The already loud music got louder as spontaneous dancing broke out everywhere. Fireworks burst on the horizon, reflecting their brilliant colors on the bottles of spirits that seemed to have multiplied as if by magic. That went on non-stop for about three hours and things seemed to be settling down when Jose and his friends said it was time to go. "Where," I asked? "You will see."

We walked a few blocks to an intersection where several hundred people had gathered, and the noise level increased expeditiously. Music blared from the central location of a corner bodega, and people literally set up their bars on the street, plopping down their spirits, mixers, ice and cups on the pavement as they drank and swayed to the music. And nothing but top shelf: Johnny Black, Chevis, Absolut. Jobs in the Dominican Republic have a custom of issuing a 13<sup>th</sup> month paycheck, putting a little extra money in people's pockets. People buy clothes just for this last night of the old year/first day of the new year and their finery shows. It is see-and-be-seen. How Dominican women stand – let alone walk – for hours in stilettos baffles me. Maybe it is in the jeans?

Around 5 a.m. we moved to another intersection of Santo Domingo, this one filled with thousands of people who were there seemingly as if summoned by a mass text message sent for people to gather at that location. Just when I thought the music couldn't be louder, it was. Fine cars paraded up and down the street, parting the crowd just enough to let the Hummers and Mercedes and Jaguars pass. From looking at the drivers of most of these luxury vehicles, I take them to be baseball players who spent some of their signing bonuses on a nice set of wheels. The blasting car stereos shook the street as they passed, causing hundreds of makeshift mini bars to clink in unison to the thumping rap and reggeaton.

Finally, about 7:30 in the morning, back in Jose's neighborhood, I sat watching the sun rise, feeling tired, yet complete in the experience of bringing the New Year in Dominican style. I as much survived it as anything, proud to have made it through my first Christmas holiday here intact. And then someone said, "Don't forget, next week is Three Kings Day!" Lord, give me strength.

### ***La Leyenda Del Cigarro* (The Legend of Cigars)**



Julio at Leyenda



Ramon, hard at work



Jose (left), with Glenn Winston

People who know me know I have a passion for cigars that exceeds just smoking them. I love the history, the tradition of cigars, knowing about cigar regions, the growers, and the master blenders who create these little bits of heaven on earth. I don't want to say I am an *aficionado*; that might sound snobbish, but I would like to think I know a thing or two about cigars.

It was my quest for a cigar that first led me more than a year ago to La Leyenda, a cigar store in Santo Domingo that also bills itself as a museum and factory and just happens to sell one of the best house blends I have ever tasted. I literally stumbled across the store in my search for a particular brand of cigar that was not available there, but the owner, Julio, offered me a couple of his brand on the house. Smooth, full of flavor, they were an immediate hit and I was back every day to feed my habit, and left the country with a box of the gems.

Living here now, Leyenda is part of my daily agenda. I am generally at my computer by 9 a.m., and work until noon or so before heading to Leyenda for my first cigar, freshly rolled by Ramon, who turns out about 1,000 cigars a week in various sizes and shapes. My cigar of preference: a maduro Churchill, sweet and satisfying to the last puff.

Leyenda is also where my friend Jose works. Jose spent many years in the US and is fluent in both the language and culture of the States, but he is in the Dominican Republic to stay. He and his lady have five children, four boys and a girl, ranging in age from five, to the little girl, born the day before Thanksgiving. How Jose takes care of his family is beyond me. His salary? Well, look at it this way. Figure minimum wage at best. Multiply that by eight hours a day, times six days a week because Jose works Monday-Saturday. That is about what his income is to provide for seven people. I have visited his home in San Carlos, one of the poorest sections of Santo Domingo, and it is basically one room with a table top stove, no bathroom. Yet his kids are always feed and always in clean clothes. I think it is the mark of a true man who makes sure above all that his family is provided for; I have a tremendous amount of respect for Jose and count him highly among the new friends I have made here. I am a frequent visitor to his home and no matter how much I try, he won't let me give him any money, even to contribute to a meal.

He and I have a good conversation almost every day, usually about sports and baseball in particular. He is upset right now because his team didn't make the Dominican playoffs, so upset he is refusing to even go to any games.

We were talking Christmas Eve about his oldest son reaching the age where he would be going to school. "I want my son to be able to have nice clothes," he said, "to be able to go to a good school. I want to put him in a baseball league so he can have that experience, you know, but it is tough with no money." As we parted company that night, he told me he was on the way to the store to buy an apple for each of his kids, and maybe some grapes; that was all he could afford this year.

Jose's son is just another reason why I want to build the Dominican Republic Sports & Education Academy, so that boys like him will at least have an opportunity to get an education, to use the Dominican passion for baseball to their advantage. Finding parents like Jose is almost as important as finding good students for the DRSEA, because without parents instilling the value of an education, children aren't as quick to find that path by themselves. *Jose es una persona especial.*

***Reminder: Una Noche En Santo Domingo (A night in Santo Domingo)*** – Just a reminder that on January 27 we will be holding a fundraiser, "***SANTO DOMINGO NIGHT II***" at the **Renaissance Cigar Emporium**, 1825 Madison Ave. (between 118<sup>th</sup> and 119<sup>th</sup>), from 6:30 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. Your \$40 donation will support the DRSEA; the evening will be full of food, drinks, and music. Cigars and gift bags will be provided to all who attend; there will also be a raffle of sports memorabilia and other items of value. Please make plans to attend this event that will have so many wonderful benefits. Sponsorship opportunities are also available. The DRSEA journey has only just begun, and only through your help, input and support can we continue to make strides towards creating a unique educational institution for which we all can be proud.

For more information on the event, or how to get tickets, go to [www.drsea.org](http://www.drsea.org) or call 212-348-7028 or 215-888-9608. Information on the Renaissance Cigar Emporium is available at [www.renaissancecigars.com](http://www.renaissancecigars.com). Tickets for the event are limited so please respond now if you are going to attend and leave contact information. Even if you can't attend, please consider

purchasing a ticket(s) as a donation to the DRSEA. And please let others you believe may be interested in attending the event and/or supporting the DRSEA know about what we are doing.

*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: 809-505-2991

Website: [www.drsea.org](http://www.drsea.org)

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