

# DRSEA INFORMER

Volume II, Issue 13: A Publication For Your Reading Enjoyment

***El Program De Lector Es Uno Para Los Libros (Reading Program Is One For The Books)*** – The third chapter of the DRSEA reading program was completed recently, again with wonderful results as the impact of the program is starting to sink in.

The program, in conjunction with Children International, sends people into Dominican communities to read aloud to children. It is in keeping with a tradition in the cigar industry called *el lector de tabaquería*. In both Cuba and the Dominican Republic, the cigar industry has long employed readers to entertain the cigar rollers while rolling and cutting the 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. The DRSEA-CI program aspires to create in children a love for reading that will last a lifetime.

The third installment of the reading program was held in Mendoza, a section of Santo Domingo where a small community center serves a reported 3,000 children, providing the only medical and dental care available for many, as well as some educational needs. When the reading program was first established, we sought to cap the number of kids in each session at 20; more than 60 bright-eyed children were awaiting us in Mendoza.

A friend of mine, Isvanel, a young art student, entertained the children, as did Jenni, the educational director for Children International in the Dominican Republic, not only reading to the children, but getting them to interact and respond to questions. The hour sped by in a blink before we handed out crayons, coloring pens and notepads, which had to be divided up carefully to accommodate the unexpected number of children.



One reason we tried to limit the number of participating children was concern over their attention span. Children can be easily distracted and the more children the more potential distractions, but I have been amazed by the Dominican kids who attend. They sit in rapt attention, rarely straying from the reader and the story, eager to participate when asked. I think the difference is that American kids have so many distractions available to them that it becomes hard to focus on any one task, while the options just are not as varied for Dominican children, so the reading program is a big deal to them.



The feedback we are now beginning to get supports that. According to Children International, which supplies the space and the children for the program, as well as a nice snack, parents are reporting to them that their kids are asking to be taken to the library to get a book to bring home. Most of the libraries we are talking about are small, with a limited amount and variety of books, but the action is significant and reflects the desired impact we wanted.

The program also gives the DRSEA the opportunity to brand itself, creating visibility and credibility, as well as develop a pipeline of potential student athletes for the academy. It has not been unusual for young boys attending the reading program to clutch a baseball glove like an appendage; hopefully they will grow up with both a love for baseball and knowledge – just the kind of students we want.

We still need donations of schools supplies for these kids, as such supplies are not always readily available for most of them. A box of crayons, even a pencil, can be a luxury for many, so if you can donate some supplies, or make a small donation that will enable us to provide some of these materials, please do so. The reading program is making a difference and you can help to ensure that it continues to have an impact in the lives of Dominican children.

***El Hogar Esta Donde Esta El Corazon (Home Is Where The Heart Is)*** – As I stepped off the plane in Santo Domingo, after a brief sojourn back to the U.S., the hot, humid air embraced me, welcoming me home, reminding me of the special place in my heart the Dominican Republic holds.

When I first visited the Dominican Republic about 15 years ago with my now ex-girlfriend, I had this incredible sensation of déjà vu, like I had been here before. Maybe it was just an early indication that I was meant to be here.

Don't get me wrong. I love the United States and all the advantages that it has provided me, but that is part of the equation. I know how lucky and blessed I have been and want to share those blessing with those who have been less fortunate, particularly children. And my experience in the Dominican Republic has been that there are many children who can and will benefit immensely from exposure to educational opportunities.

I had not been back in the United States since February, vowing not to return until I knew I would not encounter the snow and freezing rain that chilled me to the bone when I was last there. There was no snow this time, but with 55 degree temperatures and drizzling much of the time, my skin, now accustomed to the tropical climate, was sensitive and suffering. I wore a jacket much of the time.

But it was good to see my friends who are essential to my soul, and eat a lot of the foods I can't find here, such as bagels, and read the New York Daily News, and shop at 125<sup>th</sup> and Lenox. Excursions to Pennsylvania and Washington, DC, were also pleasant as I revisited people and places from my past.

But when it was all said and done, I longed to get back to the Dominican Republic. After seven months here, this is home for the foreseeable future; it is where my hopes and dreams are, where the slower pace of life suits me just fine, as the hustle and bustle of New York City reminded me. As I sat under the hot sun on a Sunday afternoon, puffing on a huge cigar, enjoying the street opera with its salsa beat, chomping on Dominican spaghetti, *longaniza*, and yucca, I clicked the heels of my sandals three times and thought to myself, "*No hay ningun lugar como el hogar.*"

***Tocando La Bateria Lentamente (Bang The Drum Slowly)*** – Have you ever known somebody for so long that you can't remember not knowing them? Such was the case with Luvinia Burruss, otherwise known as Sissy, who passed away recently at age 95. I can't think of a time when Sissy, and the diner she operated for decades near Lincoln University, was not part of my life.

Some of my earliest memories of her were going by her diner, known originally as the Roadhouse and later as Ye Ole Lions Inn, after church with my dad and having a Coke float, in part reward for going to church in the first place (excuse me, God). She and my dad would chat, sharing gossip and a chuckle or two before we headed home for Sunday dinner.

Sissy had been a cook for the du Pont family for many years before she opened up the diner, which catered mostly to Lincoln students, serving up hamburgers and hoagies, a local delicacy, as Sissy would also dispense advice, requested or not. The service was generally slow, and she would frequently mix up an order during the nightly chaos, but it was the only place within miles where you could get something to eat at midnight. Many a student would leave, vowing never to return, but the late night munchies had a way of forcing a retreat from that promise. And there was many a student who had no money but left the diner with a full stomach due to Sissy's generosity.

I had my first job with Sissy, at age 12, working for 50 cents an hour, bussing table and sometimes filling the grill orders myself. I can still tell you the proper ingredients for a classic cheese steak – please don't put any of that orange gunk on one and call it the real deal! I remember the first weekend I worked there and getting a crisp \$10 bill and thinking I was the richest kid on Earth. Or course, ten bucks went a lot further than it does today.

In later years, Sissy's was the place we would end up on Christmas Eve, when she served her "game" dinner featuring anything from venison to rabbit to groundhog to pheasant to squirrel, along with traditional ham and turkey with all the trimmings. There usually was also a pot of chitlins on the stove; to this day I only eat chitlins if I know the person who fixed them. People who eat them know exactly what I mean.

She was the sweetheart of one of the campus fraternity's (not mine), and when a former Lincoln president would not let the frat have a barbeque on campus during Commencement Weekend, Sissy let them use her backyard for the event and for years the Kappa bull roast at Sissy's was a must-attend event, ending only when the president was ousted and the event was allowed on campus.

Whenever I got back to Lincoln, dropping by Sissy's was always on my agenda, as it was with just about everyone who has passed through Lincoln's gate in the past five decades. She may have never attended a class, but she was as much a part of Lincoln as any poet laureate or Supreme Court justice ever was.

When my sister and mother died, Sissy was one of the first to our house, and when my dad took gravely ill, Sissy was there in his hospital room when I arrived. She was that kind of woman; she took her friendships seriously. "Farrell," I can hear her telling me now. "Treat people the way you want to be treated."

At her funeral, someone said she had been a living history book; someone else referred to her as a legend and a legacy. To me she was just Sissy, who I have known forever.



Sissy, in early May

***Memorias De El Dia De Los Padres (Father's Day Memories)*** – The volume is weathered, frayed at the corners with yellowed pages as you would expect a book in excess of 80 years old to be (or not to be). It is a collection of the works of William Shakespeare, but it is not the words of the Bard that inspire my dreams on many a midsummer night, but the notations

made in the margins by my father, who was a student at Lincoln (Class of 1934) and later a professor of English for 38 years. His musings on Shakespeare, in pencil in his distinct cursive, are a reminder of how respectful he always treated the English language, something I try to do as well.

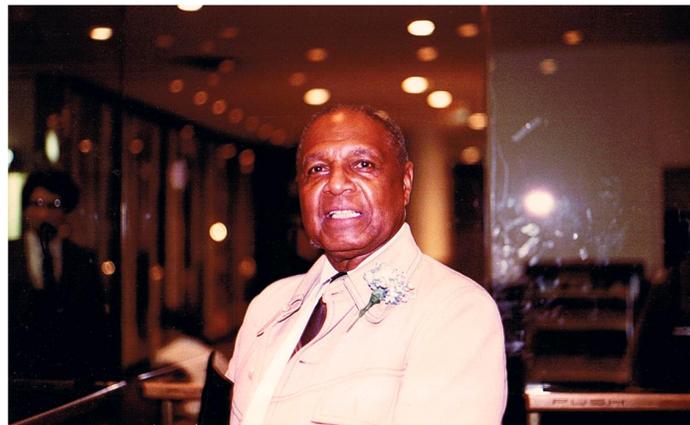
He was the first African American to receive a PhD in English from Ohio State University, something I didn't even know until after he died. He had an eloquence about him that distinguished him, set him apart, and elevated him. He was not only my dad, he was *Dr. Farrell*, English professor, teacher and mentor to legions of Lincoln University students, including myself. My first journalism class was from him. I took it on pass-fail, never asking him what grade he would have given me.

We shared a love for Lincoln; it drew us even closer as time went on as we were not only father-son, but fellow alums of the Dear Old Orange and Blue. He was 91 when he died in 2005. I had not been able to be with him on his last birthday on February 14, Valentine's Day, but had made a special trip to visit him a couple of months later. I took him to breakfast the morning I was leaving; he always liked to go out to eat and seemed to take special pleasure in me picking up the tab, like he had earned the right, which he had.

As I caught the train back to New York City that day, I remember thinking how my relationship with my father had changed over the years, from when he took care of me to when I was taking care of him and how, over the years, he had become my friend as well as my father. Tears welled in my eyes with that realization, never dreaming that the next time I would see him was in a hospital bed he would never leave. I used to sit in his room at the hospital, playing for him recordings of the Broadway show tunes he loved so much, listening to him humming along.

When I sat to write my dad's funeral services, I remembered fondly how fussy he was about language, how particular he was about English usage, correct pronunciation and correct punctuation. He had a favorite story about how a comma, or its misuse, can change everything.

*A panda walks into a café one day. The panda eats a sandwich, fires a gun in the air and walks towards the door. When the waiter asks in confusion what he thinks he's doing, the panda throws him a badly punctuated book on wildlife: "Panda. Large black-and-white bear-like mammal, native to China. Eats, shoots and leaves."*



Dr. H. Alfred Farrell, distinguished educator

**In thy face I see honor, truth and loyalty.**  
-- William Shakespeare

I miss him every single day; his wisdom, his cleverness and wit, his counsel and encouragement. He was a special man; he was my hero.

## ***Otras Noticias De Interés (Other News of Interest)***

***So Long Sammy*** – In a move that was hardly surprising, potential Hall of Famer Sammy Sosa has announced he will officially retire from baseball. Sosa, who has been out of baseball for more than a year, retires as one of Major League Baseball's greatest power hitters and a key component of baseball's resurgence after the 1994 baseball strike that threatened to undermine the national pastime. Sosa joined with slugger Mark McGwire in the 1998 season to go on what was known as "The Chase," or the epic race to break Roger Maris's season record of 61 homeruns.

Sosa hit 66 that season to McGwire's 70, but the chase pressed the Dominican player into the hearts and minds of many Americans and was credited with restoring America's faith and love in baseball again. But Sosa's success at the plate ran into controversy when he was linked to the use of performance enhancing substances. Though no proof has ever been found, Sosa's career in the "steroid era" has cast a pall on his career. While his enshrinement in Cooperstown may be up in the air, Sosa said, "I will calmly wait for my induction to the Baseball Hall of Fame. Don't I have the numbers to be inducted? Everything I achieved, I did it thanks to my perseverance, which is why I never had any long, difficult moments (as a baseball player). If you have a bad day in baseball, and start thinking about it, you will have 10 more." Sosa is the sixth player in Major League Baseball history to achieve 609 homeruns, 24th in RBIs with 1,667, 42nd in slugging percentage with .534 and second all time with 2,306 strikeouts..

***Counting Dominicans*** – The Dominican American Round Table (DANR) has launched a campaign "One Plus One" in the U.S. and Puerto Rico to lobby for the inclusion of a box in the 2010 Census for Dominicans to identify themselves as Dominicans, the same way Mexicans, Puerto Ricans and Cubans can do. Otherwise, Dominicans are lumped into the "Other Hispanics" category.

DANR President Nestor Montilla points out that Dominicans could be the second largest immigrant group in the U.S. "It is unconceivable and detrimental for our community that the Dominican presence is not treated appropriately in the census," he told El Diario La Prensa in New York City. "It is important because public funds are budgeted according to official demographic figures. If the group is not specified, then Dominican community numbers will be undercounted and there will be less funding for programs benefiting the community."

The 2000 Census showed 35 million Hispanics (12.5% of the US population), including 20,640,711 Mexicans (58.5% of Hispanics), 3,406,178 Puerto Ricans (9.6%), 1,241,685 Cubans (3.5%) and 764,945 Dominicans (2.2%). But DANR says the 2010 Census could show a Dominican population of 1,920,831 Dominicans, which would make Dominicans the second largest immigrant group, surpassing Cubans.

## **LETTERS TO THE DRSEA INFORMER:**

**Brady Pendleton of Atlanta, GA asks: Do you feel the scandals involving steroids and Dominican baseball players will create a setback for the DRSEA by having people believe that things are really out of control and not worth investing in your project?:** Actually Brady, to the contrary. The silver lining to all the controversy is that it is shining the spotlight on the Dominican Republic and baseball here. While I don't think things are totally out of control, baseball in the Dominican Republic has had the luxury of operating in relative obscurity for years and is now being seen warts and all. The DRSEA is part of the solution to the problems plaguing baseball in the Dominican Republic. Education is an important key to addressing those problems, and is worth the investment as it will pay dividends for years to come.

*Charles S. Farrell*

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