



DRSEA INFORMER

Volume II, Issue 15: A Publication For Your Reading Enjoyment

La Vista Desde El Barrio (A View From The ‘Hood) – Having been raised in rural Pennsylvania, there is no way I can even fake the street cred gained from growing up one of the boys in the ‘hood. But I have enough friends who come from the mean streets of places like Compton, North Philly, Bed-Sty and South Side to know what the ‘hood looks like and the dangers it too often possesses.

But I still was a little taken aback when I visited *Los Tres Brazos* (The Three Arms), the site of the latest chapter of the DRSEA reading program. 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.

When I stepped out of the car in *Los Tres Brazos*, a community in Santo Domingo, I was glad I had come with others as opposed to taking a taxi alone as I had originally planned. I felt a sense of Wild, Wild West as residents stepped onto their porches to see the stranger brave enough to come to their neighborhood, even in broad daylight. The school where the event was being held was on a bluffs overlooking a shantytown of tin-roofed huts that formed a quilt on the landscape below. Piles of garbage marked the perimeters.

Even the Dominican flag at the entrance to the school was tattered and torn, as if to say, “Everybody and everything in this neighborhood takes it lumps.” This is a neighborhood so tough that people from admittedly rough neighborhoods said to avoid it. “You are going where? Man, nobody goes there,” they told me.

But there I was, and also there were more than 50 eager kids crowded into a 12-by-15 room in the stifling heat. An overhead fan was useless without electricity as were the two light fixtures flanking it. The children fanned themselves with the plastic ID cards they all carried, but the motion did little to stir the liquid air.

The reader this day is an author in her own right and she has the children mesmerized within minutes as they eagerly are pulled into her narration, responding to questions in unison and cheering the action from beginning to end. The reading program continues to inspire in children exactly what I envisioned it would do, but never could I have imagined the depth of need.

At the end, crayons and pens I brought were distributed to the kids who grabbed them like gold coins from a treasure chest. What was odd was that the kids tested the pens by writing on their hands and arms; odd until I realized they had no paper to write on. Nor were there any books in sight, or even chalk to write on the cracked and broken boards on the otherwise barren walls. I marvel at how a child can learn in these conditions and conclude the answer is that it is difficult at best.

Later this month we have yet another installment of the reading program. This time I will be sure to bring paper.

Growing Pains – As we were setting up the room, gathering the children together for the reading program, I couldn't help notice one girl in the back corner who stood out. At first I couldn't figure out exactly why. Sure, she was half a head taller than the rest of the class, and more mature; I thought at first she must be a teacher's assistant, but when she joined the rest of the children in raising their hands, I knew that wasn't the case. But she looked so awkward; a fruit, yet an apple among oranges.

Then it dawned on me. She was that one girl in every group who is the first to mature, to reach puberty, and be caught between childhood and womanhood. I couldn't help but wonder if there was someone who was telling her what was happening to her body, explaining to her the changes she was going through? You have to understand that the Dominican Republic is a place where I have seen 14-year-old wives; 16-year-olds with two children. I know of a 19-year-old with an eight-year-old son. You do the math.

I told a friend, an American who has lived in the Dominican Republic since she was a child, about this young girl and my fears and was told I was justified. "Come back in two years and she will probably have a child of her own," my friend said, explaining that sex education in the Dominican Republic too often is experimentation between young boys and young girls with predictable results.

One of the things I have to continually caution myself about is becoming too empathetic and trying to take on all the challenges I encounter in the Dominican Republic, but I can't stand the thought of wasted potential. Statistics on babies having babies are appalling in any language. The dropout rate in the Dominican Republic is already astronomically high and a young, uneducated girl with a baby has few opportunities beyond possible marriage and more babies. It is a vicious cycle and I feel frustrated in my inability to provide solutions.

It is close to heartbreaking as I realize that a future student at the DRSEA is being raised right now by a young girl who isn't being taught about her own development, her own potential, of human potential, and now is nurturing another generation that will keep repeating itself unless options and answers and solutions are provided.

But I just have to keep remembering that, sad but true, I can't help everyone, can't fix everything. And that breaks my heart.

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference. – The Serenity Prayer

La Vida No Es Justa (Life Is Not Fair) – The murder of former NFL All-Pro and MVP Steve McNair struck a chord in me. I had met McNair when he was a standout at Alcorn State; he was also a member of the same fraternity, Omega Psi Phi, which meant we shared certain cardinal principles that guide our lives. His death was a painful reminder of just how unfair life can be.



I met McNair when Alcorn played Howard University during the time I was a consultant for the Howard University Sports Information Department, helping to write and edit media guides under the direction of my good friend Ed Hill, the longtime sports information director there. McNair had orchestrated a miraculous second half comeback against Howard, generating over 400 yards of offense after the intermission where Howard led 36-6, but falling short in a 48-42 loss. “Air” McNair rushed for 78 yards and was 27 of 45 for 384 yards and three touchdowns. After the game, Ed asked me to get some quotes from McNair for dissemination to the media.

I found in McNair a humble, thoughtful and intelligent young man, completely at ease with his role as an exceptional black quarterback in a sport that was still skeptical about the abilities of black quarterbacks. He had been recruited by major colleges as a defensive back but got the opportunity to excel at Alcorn; he was third in the Heisman Trophy balloting as a senior.

He went on to have a stellar professional career, leading the Tennessee Titans to within a yard of a Super Bowl victory; I happened to be in the stands that day. McNair retired after 13 years in the NFL when injuries made it impossible for him to continue.

The circumstances of his death notwithstanding, this was by all accounts an exceptional man; a great teammate, a good father, a responsible humanitarian. One of the first things he did after turning pro was build his mother a house – on land purchased where she used to chop cotton to provide for her family. He started a foundation that provided opportunities and resources to hundreds of underprivileged children who benefitted immensely from his generosity.

What bothers me more than his untimely death are the slings and arrows McNair’s reputation has taken in the aftermath. Why is it that athletes who are exalted for their heroics on the field of competition are vilified when they prove to be human and fallible? This was not a man who

preached family values and then went out and fathered a child out of wedlock, or some such hypocrisy. He played football at the highest level and did it well and now there are those who would tarnish him, his reputation and his legacy by applying standards of measurements arising from the circumstances of his death. It is not fair; then again, neither is life.



Mejores Deseos Para Manny Acta (Best Wishes To Manny Acta) – I had figured it was inevitable, given the record of the Washington Nationals under Manny Acta, but I was still sad to see him fired. There are so few managers of color in baseball that the loss of even one is monumental.

By all accounts, Acta was a class act. I actually met him a few months ago in the Dominican Republic at a reception to announce a joint venture between Major League Baseball and the USAID called MLB-USAID-Dominican Development Alliance. The Alliance, which seeks to use baseball as a catalyst for improving the lives of the less fortunate in the Dominican, is a partnership between Major League Baseball, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Peace Corps and six well-known charitable non-profit institutions – World Vision, Save the Children, Plan International, Esperanza International, Batey Relief Alliance and the Dominican Institute for Integrated Development.

I made a major faux pas when I met Acta at the reception. Not recognizing him, I asked if he was in baseball. “Yes,” he said, “I am the manager of the Washington Nationals.” He showed a wonderful sense of humor when I tried to cover myself by saying I didn’t recognize him because I usually saw him on TV in the dugout with his hat on. He said, “Not likely; we don’t get on TV that much. You only get on TV if you are real good, and we are not there yet.” They still aren’t; the Nationals need a magician, not a manager. I only hope that Acta will get another chance to manage a team, something rarely offered people of color in sports.

Cumpleanos Vienen Y Pasan (Birthdays Come And Birthdays Go) – Another birthday has come and gone, but this one will remain memorable for awhile as I was surrounded by new friends here in the Dominican Republic. They threw a small party for me; nothing big, about 15 people on the rooftop of the building where I live, overlooking the Malecon with a panoramic view of Santo Domingo. There was good food, with lots of beer and rum, and salsa, merengue and reggeton. My friends took me out dancing until 4 in the morning and I am still recuperating days later.

On my actual birthday, a friend cooked for me and a couple of others, fixing my favorite Dominican dish called *sancocho*, a stew that is complex in flavors and long in comfort. It has a variety of meats including beef, pork and chicken, as well as sausage, that are combined with potatoes (white and sweet), carrots, yucca, plaintains and other vegetables, together with assorted spices that result in a gustatory explosion.



Served with rice, there simply is nothing like it. I have decided that if I am ever able to request a last meal, it will be *sancocho*.

I also was gifted with a few choice cigars, including a Cohiba maduro robusto that Cuba just starting producing. What a great cigar; dark in color, rich is flavor, an epic experience. I love my Dominican cigars, but Cuban cigars take smoking to a different level. And this new maduro helped to make my birthday that more special.

Tomando Un Descanso (Taking A Break) – While I am still a long way from mastering the language, I am proud of how far I have come with my Spanish. I can conduct most simple tasks in Spanish, from shopping, to traveling, to general conversations, though I must admit I understand more than I can speak. But *estoy aprendiendo mas diario*.

One of the simple tasks I am confronted with frequently is adding minutes to my cell phone; the majority of phones in this country are pay-as-you-go and I am no exception. You can buy cards, but get bonus minutes if you go to certain locations in person and buy the time.

At one location, the attendant knows me well enough to have memorized my number and he and I exchange pleasantries on each visit. One day he was missing in action when I stopped in so a couple of hours later when I returned I asked him in Spanish where he had been. “*Estaba aquí hace unas par de horas. Donde estaba usted?*”

He looked puzzled, then checked his watch, calculated back a couple of hours and exclaimed with the biggest grin possible, “**Lunch!**” Everybody deserves a break, huh?

Otras Noticias De Interés (Other News of Interest)

There Is More To Dominican Sports Than Baseball – The Dominican Republic women's national volleyball team recently lost to Olympic champions Brazil in the finals of the Women's Pan American Cup held in Miami. The women lost 25-18, 25-20, 25-14 in the gold medal match at the University of Miami to a team they defeated in the first round. Brazil's last Pan American title came in 2006 when the competition was held in Puerto Rico. The Dominican Republic was the defending tournament champion. Brazil, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico and the U.S. qualified for next year's World Grand Prix, the FIVB's premier annual women's competition, in Japan.

The Dominican Republic junior national golf team won the XXII Caribbean Amateur Junior Golf Championship that took place at the Cinnamon Hill Golf Club in Montego Bay, Jamaica. The Dominican Republic was first, Trinidad second, and Puerto Rico third. The Bahamas, Barbados, Cayman Islands and Jamaican teams also competed. The win qualified the Dominican Republic team to take part in the world junior championship in Japan this week.

A total of six Dominican taekwondo athletes have made the latest ranking by the World Taekwondo Federation. The group includes Olympic gold medalist Gabriel Mercedes, as well as Luis Casado, Richard Alcantara and Yahaira Peguero. Mercedes received the #2 ranking in the world, in the 58kg weight class. Jairo Rijo was ranked #7 in the world in the same weight class. Luis Casado received the ranking of #3 in the world in the 54kg weight category. Johnny Batermi was ranked 17th in the 68kg category, Richard Alcantara was ranked 9th in the 87kg category and Yajaira Peguero was ranked 15th in the 49kg category.

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