



A DECADE IN THE

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC



By Michelle M. Boehm, GA'12

A DECADE HAS PASSED since Duquesne University staff and students first traveled to a Spiritan mission in Villa Liberación, Dominican Republic, to help run a children's day camp as part of a cross-cultural mission experience. Through the years, this collaborative effort has inspired numerous friendships, hope for better futures and, for one Dominican camper, Roy Alejandro Reyes, a yearly return trip.

Roy Alejandro Reyes has never missed a week of camp—not as a 10-year-old camper, not as a teen helper and not even as an adult, who moved away to live, work and attend university in Santo Domingo. Reyes returns each year. He doesn't care that it takes close to seven hours to travel just a bit more than 100 miles. Nor that he has to begin his journey on foot, take two taxis and sit through a six-hour, stop-and-go bus ride. He happily repeats the trek so he can spend his vacation as a camp volunteer overseeing roughly 90 children. The camp means so much to Reyes because it was where he first learned to shed life's burdens and for a brief moment in time, just be a kid.

Spiritans in the Dominican Republic

Villa Liberación, a poor barrio located in the northern section of San Juan de la Maguana, began as an emergency refugee tent camp after Hurricane Georges swept through the Dominican Republic in 1998, destroying entire neighborhoods and displacing the country's most vulnerable residents. The newly formed community struggled with poverty, high rates of unemployment and widespread gang violence.

In 2004, the Spiritans arrived in the Dominican Republic for the first time and established Nuestra Señora de la Esperanza (Our Lady of Hope Parish). When the Reverend Donald McEachin, C.S.Sp., a former Duquesne University campus minister and seasoned Spiritan missionary who worked in Africa and the Caribbean, began to serve the community, he found the people demoralized and disorganized.

"Coming from different rural villages, the resettled refugees had no real sense of community. In a traditional Dominican village, there are strong bonds of family and people look after one another. But in our barrio, the gangs controlled the situation and people lived in fear," he says.

Rebuilding Through Youth Outreach

Life in the barrio is difficult for adults; for a child, it is harder. Children as young as 7 years old manage households and raise younger siblings while parents travel for work. This limits future opportunities and leaves them vulnerable to negative influences. McEachin sought to counteract this growing trend and rebuild the community through youth-directed initiatives.

"By focusing on youth, we could address problems of delinquency, violence and drugs, and improve not only their lives, but the lives of entire families," he says.

As a former campus minister, McEachin was familiar with Duquesne-sponsored cross-cultural mission experiences (CCME) and approached Duquesne officials with the idea of expanding to the Dominican Republic. He proposed a weeklong camp that would bring together Duquesne

SPIRITAN MINISTRY IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

It has been 10 years since Duquesne students first traveled to the Dominican Republic as part of a cross-cultural mission experience, but the first Spiritan missionary presence was established several years earlier through a collaborative effort by the Spiritan Provinces of North and Central America.

The initial team, which included the Reverends Jonas Rivera Martinez, C.S.Sp., from Puerto Rico, Donald McEachin, C.S.Sp., from the United States, and Werby Mital, C.S.Sp., from Haiti, arrived in 2004 ready to establish three parishes to achieve four key pastoral goals:

- **Strengthen and grow** local churches
- **Expand** evangelization and youth ministry
- **Construct** chapels in areas without adequate structures
- **Build** larger chapels to support growing communities

Since their arrival, the Spiritan parishes have met the needs of their growing communities through the construction of new facilities and the development of educational programs. Community relations have been strengthened through a lively and energetic youth ministry, which includes hundreds of youth participating in youth groups, retreats, summer camps, social outreach activities, catechism classes and sacramental preparation.

students with Dominican children and teens from his parish.

"We spoke about parish needs and how Duquesne might best make an impact by working with its at-risk youth," says McEachin. The camp would offer a safe space to children like Reyes.

McEachin's work paid off. In 2008, the first Duquesne CCME group arrived. Camp Duquesne was born.

Structured Play at Camp Duquesne

Locals refer to it as Camp Duquesne, but it is a truly collaborative effort shared by the Duquesne students and Dominican teens, who must work through language barriers and logistics to create a positive mentoring experience for the barrio's youth. They work to develop and present four daily structured play activities: crafts, dance, sports and story time.

Former Duquesne Campus Minister Kate Lecci explains that children living in poverty are frequently robbed of childhood.

"Structured play is a developmental tool used for children living in lower socioeconomic environments. They surrender their adult-like



Each year, Duquesne students work closely with Dominican teens to run a day camp for children as part of the Dominican Republic Cross-Cultural Mission Experience. While running the camp is the primary focus, students also spend a lot of time taking in the various aspects of Dominican culture and getting to know the teens through various activities and excursions.



Crowdfunding is a new tool to help broaden the services Duquesne students provide as part of their cross-cultural mission experiences.

In three years, **31 students** raised roughly **\$7,600** through crowdfunding to aid the elderly and infirm living within the Dominican Republic.

responsibilities and learn things like the months of the year through song or fine motor skills through crafts," Lecci says.

Positive interactions through structured play help improve children's physical, cognitive, interpersonal and emotional skills. As Duquesne students and the Dominican teens work together, Lecci and McEachin take a hands-off approach.

"Sure, we're there if needed, but we want them to work independently, gain confidence and be strong role models," Lecci says. "When the children see them together, presenting activities they've

put time into, it shows they care. These activities do more than teach; they strengthen the bonds between participants and set the stage for lasting memories and friendships."

Reyes was only 10 years old when he attended that first camp, yet memories of his experience remain fresh.

"From the beginning, camp meant so much to me," he says. "Each morning, for just a few hours, for a whole week, I got to escape and take a vacation from a difficult life. I got to be a child, to make friends and be a part of something wonderful."

He recalls seeing the sea for the first



Above: Roy Alejandro Reyes, pictured with former Spiritan Campus Minister Kate Lecci and in a camp classroom, values the many Duquesne friendships he has made throughout the years.

time while taking part in a camp activity.

“It was incredible. That week is what I imagine winning an all-inclusive trip to Disney would be like,” he says. “I never forgot that day or my new friends.”

The next year, Reyes learned he could return to camp as a teen volunteer. He hasn’t missed a year since.

Inspiring Friendships

Most mornings, children will begin to gather around the church fences more than an hour before camp is set to open.

“This is something they look forward to all year,” explains senior nursing student

Emily Crisan, who participated in the 2017 trip. Crisan enjoyed the language and culture, but remarks that it was getting to know the teens and working with them and the children that made the experience so worthwhile.

Over the years, Duquesne students claim the friendships they’ve formed with the Dominican teens and children have had a long-lasting impact. Maggie Zangara, GE’18, says it was the Dominican people and the connections she made that drew her back to the mission not once, but a total of three times.

“I’m thankful to have had the opportunity to go multiple times,” says Zangara, whose favorite part of the trip was spending time with the teens outside of camp and seeing their unique sense of community.

In addition to the lifelong friendships and memories, the trip exposes participants to the everyday challenges the communities face. During Crisan’s trip, the town was shut off from water for several days and then experienced a major rain storm and subsequent flooding.

“This experience really got to me—it was incredible and difficult at the same time. It was a struggle to accept that I, alone, would not be able to change things,” says Crisan.

“The poverty is so bad. You come to know and love these kids and teens in just a week and you want to do something to fix everything for them but you can’t,” she continues. “I knew going in that I was there to provide mentorship, to get to know the people and learn, but even with that mentality, it is hard to push away the urge that something bigger than what you are capable of needs to be done to help them.”

“I Lived for the Camp”

Reyes tried, but did not know how to fully express the impact Camp Duquesne had on his life.

“I just know I lived for the camp,” he says. “I learned to be stronger and to create bonds of friendship.”

When not attending camp, Reyes studies business administration at Autonomous University of Santo Domingo and works as a hotel customer service representative. He hopes to travel and help his family. But his greatest dream is to one day build an orphanage.

“I want to help children who have had their childhoods taken away,” he says. “I want to give all children the happiness I did not have—give that joy, happiness and emotion that I only knew for a single week each year with the people of Duquesne University. I want to help change the world.” ♦



Rev. Donald McEachin, C.S.Sp.

A Ray of Hope for Nuestra Señora de la Esperanza

To rebuild and strengthen the Nuestra Señora de la Esperanza (Our Lady of Hope Parish) and its surrounding community, the Reverend Donald McEachin, C.S.Sp., has focused on several educational outreach initiatives. He has established:

- a **job training center** for adults
- Ludoteca, a **children’s creative play/day care center**
- **catechetical formation**, which welcomes more than 300 children annually
- a new **basketball gymnasium**
- adult **literacy training**
- two computer centers with **free internet access for school children**
- a **music school** that teaches piano and guitar
- Saint Michael’s Fe y Alegria, a **tuition-free technical high school** that welcomes more than 500 students

“We are slowly making real our dream of a better life and a vital Christian community at the very center of the life of our barrio,” says McEachin. ♦