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Final Report

To sum up in just two pages the richness of my experience as a Rotary Ambassadorial Scholar in the Dominican Republic would be an entirely impossible task. Thus, I will attempt to convey in this report the highlights of my time there and the profound meaning this experience had upon my life.

Flying into Santo Domingo can be startling for someone who has never been to a third-world country. Although the initial shock of landing in a place that is culturally and physically so distinct from the United States could have handicapped my enjoyment of my first few days in the Dominican Republic, to my comfort and relief I found my host family anxiously waiting my arrival in the airport terminal.

My experience staying with the Mendez family was educational and largely enjoyable, with a few not-so-enjoyable exceptions due to cultural differences. The interconnectedness of Dominican families was immediately apparent. While the Mendez's had a relatively large house, they would constantly gather in one small room, such as a bedroom or the kitchen. Most families there spend the evening watching television or talking together instead of eating a large family dinner, as American families do. At first I found myself very hungry at dinnertime, since their evening meal would consist of a small piece of bread or fruit, if they ate anything. I soon realized that the large family meal comes at our lunchtime in the Dominican Republic, and they eat much more than I normally do at lunch. Despite minor differences in tradition and values, I found the Mendez family to be much like my own family in the way they care for one another, welcome visitors like myself, and seek enjoyment from the simple things in life.

My homestay was enriching and rewarding, and I learned much about the Dominican people and their culture simply by living and talking with them. However, this was not the only meaningful aspect of my experience. I began studying Spanish soon after my arrival at the Instituto Intercultural de Caribe (IIC). Although I studied Spanish in high school, I was not prepared to live in a Spanish-speaking country because I was simply unable to communicate. The language barrier I encountered became a major obstacle to my freedom, safety, and happiness in a new place. Once I realized the great necessity of communication to my everyday life, I had a renewed desire to learn everything I could about the language and how to speak it.

The quality of the instruction I received at the IIC was dependent on the teacher; some teachers were exceptionally good and others were just average. My advice to future Ambassadorial Scholars would be to seek out the best teachers and try to stay in their classes. I found the amount I learned was dependent on how much time and effort I put into studying Spanish on my own. Over the course of four months, I became much more confident in my ability to communicate in Spanish and was able to practice by talking to Dominicans around town, which augmented my understanding of their culture.

The ability to speak Spanish is going to further my academic and career pursuits because this fall I will be starting law school in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Due to the fact that there is a large Mexican population in North Carolina, I hope to serve the legal needs of the Spanish-speaking community and pursue friendships with my neighbors who may not speak English. The frustrations that I experienced due to my inability to

communicate will also allow me to empathize with those who are experiencing similar difficulties in the United States.

Another great element of the Ambassadorial Scholarship was making friendships and connections with my host Rotarians and my sponsors. Before leaving, I had the pleasure of meeting several Rotarians with my sponsor club who will be beneficial connections in the future. I also met my host, Roberto Baez, in Santo Domingo, the first time I attended a Rotary Club there. He proved to be a good friend, inviting me to visit his family's home near the beach and giving me rides to and from Rotary meetings. It was interesting to observe meetings of Rotary clubs overseas. There are many opportunities for educated people to make a difference in third world countries. The Rotarians in Santo Domingo were working collaboratively on a project which would provide clean drinking water to an impoverished community of Haitian immigrants. It was truly amazing to see how many tasks a small group of Rotarians could accomplish together. The presentations I gave both in the Dominican Republic and when I returned home were fun and challenged me to use my Spanish in a formal setting.

Perhaps the most enjoyable part of my time in the Dominican Republic, and the experience I feel was the most meaningful, was the chance I had to volunteer at Colegio Nueva Vida (New Life School). Although I could not work as a full-time teacher there, I was able to spend quite a bit of time assisting the English teacher in teaching the Dominican children to speak English. Due to the dependence of the Dominican economy on tourism, English is the most important subject taught in school. Many jobs require English proficiency and thus the students were eager to learn from me. I made friends with several of the teachers and students, which gave me great opportunity to practice my Spanish. I was even able to participate in the games they played during physical education once in a while. This experience taught me the value of service, not only for the people I served, but through the benefits I gained from serving. I have decided to sponsor a child at the school with a small amount of money per month to pay for food, clothes, and school supplies.

I am very grateful to the Rotary club for the opportunity to travel abroad, study the Spanish language, and gain valuable experience that I will cherish for the rest of my life. I was thrilled to receive the scholarship and I was impressed with the organization of the details of my trip and the flexibility they were able to give me in my travels. The orientation process was thorough and prepared me with all the details I needed for the trip. I would advise any future scholars to immerse themselves in the culture of the country to which they travel as much as possible, because this will enhance the relationships they make there and their learning experience.

I would definitely like to stay involved with the Rotary club and have recommended a friend to apply for the scholarship. He is currently in Bogota, Colombia with a Rotary Ambassadorial Scholarship. I will consider joining the Rotary club when I get through law school because I think it is very meaningful to foster a sense of community among business leaders and for reaching out to those in need.