

A Week with the Poorest of the Poor

Dominican Republic: November 14 to 21, 2009

by Dick Fiala

Introduction

Louise and I have known Gail and Roger Perry for over thirty years. Twenty years ago, Roger took his first group of students to help the “poorest of the poor” in the bateyes of the Dominican Republic. Since then, various groups led by Roger have been returning to the bateys every year. Recently they established the organization “Friends for Life” to facilitate this charitable work.

A “**batey**” (plural form “bateyes”) is a sugar cane camp for Haitian sugar cane workers looking for a “better life”. For many years some of the Haitians have been hired either by the big sugar cane companies, by former Dominican governments or have been captured by gangs acting like bounty hunters collecting Haitians for the fields. Upon arriving in the Dominican Republic their papers are collected by the companies and often destroyed, effectively making the workers stateless and no longer able to return to their homeland. Although a large number of the present day inhabitants of the bateyes were actually born in the bateyes, they are not given Dominican status. These people continue to be stateless and are treated more like property than human beings.

It was back in the 80’s when Roger took his first group that we said to him “someday we would like to go with you”. In May of this year they invited us up to Waltham, Quebec for a visit, and it was on this occasion that they asked us if we would go with them on their next missionary trip.

In early September we got a call from Gail “if you are still interested in coming, book your ticket tomorrow morning and get your shots this weekend”. It was probably just as well that I didn’t know the \$680 cost of those shots -- hepatitis, typhoid and a tetanus booster -- until we had to pay! That was our first call to let go and trust in the Lord.

A couple of weeks later we drove up to Pembroke, Ontario which is across the river from Waltham, Quebec for our first planning meeting where we got to know a few of our fellow missionaries, including Sister Susan who would be going down ahead of us. We also learned that we would have Lynn, who is a pharmacist, Roger and Gail’s son-in-law Eric, a hearing specialist, Dr. Don from Deep River, and Gail who is a registered nurse. As well we had Roger and Gail’s daughter Lisa who has made the trip several times. Thanks to Lisa we managed to bring pretty well everything we needed and she also gave us a good idea of what to expect when we got to Yamasá. We also had Ed the farmer, Mel, a retired gentleman, Sara, a University of Toronto student, and Pauline and Terry another “almost retired” couple from the Quebec side. The ride home from Pembroke was a mixture of excitement and fear of the conditions awaiting us among the poor of Yamasá.

Sunday November 8th

This was packing day. We all gathered in Lynn’s basement in Pembroke, hauled everything in, and started packing. Some of us packed, while others eliminated excess packaging. Pauline &

Terry carefully weighed and tagged each bag. Eric was kept busy loading the bags into the vans outside. We gave thanks to Gail for a great chili lunch. As we headed home with our precious cargo of ten hockey bags and a wheelchair, my concerns about the unknown began to vanish.

Saturday November 14th

At 4:30 a.m. sharp, we arrived at the Ottawa International airport just as the other two vans containing the other sixteen bags and 500 pounds of medicine pulled in. It took a while, but unloading and check-in went pretty smoothly. West Jet assigned us our very own hostess Rachel, who understood our mission and turned a blind eye to our significantly over-weight bags.

At 7:10 a.m., we were off on flight 2812! No turning back now. Four hours later we arrived in Punta Cana to face what may have been the biggest challenge of the trip – the customs agents! Tourists just sailed through; however, it was not the same for us. The staff busied themselves combing through every last item of our cargo. Even Louise's almonds were suspect until I opened them and told the agent to smell them.



Our luggage bound for flight 2812 (each white box contains 50 lbs. of medicine)

Unlike the tourists, we were not permitted to use the trolleys to go any further and as soon as we walked past a certain indeterminate point we were not permitted to return. Some of us carried the bags to that point and slid them across the line to Mel, Don and the others who had "gone too far". In the meantime, despite having a letter from the Dominican Embassy in Ottawa and being met by a medical representative, customs really didn't want to give us our medicine. They offered to let us take half of it and come back for the rest the following Monday. If any were left! Two hours later, our mighty warriors, Roger, Lynn and Lisa finally convinced them to release all the boxes of medicine.

Meanwhile, Sister Noelia, Angela, Rosa Hermenia, Carmen, Sister Susan and a few able bodied young gentlemen from Yamasá provided sandwiches and cold drinks to keep us going as we stood there in the humid 30°C heat. Finally at 2:30 p.m. we loaded our precious cargo into the truck and the back third of the bus, leaving barely enough room for the group. Danny, our faithful driver, got us to our destination unscathed which is no small feat in the Dominican Republic. First rule of the road: the biggest vehicle has the right of way. Lane markings

including the middle line don't really mean much. Sometimes there were two extra cars abreast while at other times the bus would straddle the white line. Smaller cars and motorcycles, mostly Honda 90 cc's, zoomed in and out of the traffic. Motorbikes hauled everything from three or four people to eight foot steel beams which were precariously balanced perpendicular to the road!

5:00 p.m. brought us to the Grey Nuns convent in Consuelo where we filled up on more food to sustain us. A guard opened the gate to the convent grounds just long enough for us to enter. The cement fences were topped with large spiraling barbed cylinders that reminded one of a prison more than a convent. Sisters Lenore, Catherine, Susan and Natti served salads, chicken, cheese and buns followed by coffee, juice, pineapple and cantaloupe. We soon learned that root vegetables, chicken and juice were their dietary staples. We also found out that Sister Catherine once attended university with our Ottawa pastor, Msgr. Bob Latour.

Shortly after 6:00 we were off on the last leg of our journey. Traffic in Santa Domingo slowed us down and we didn't arrive in Yamasá until 9:00 pm. After we unloaded our bags at the clinic, the bus took each of us to our host homes. All of us were in homes that were within easy walking distance of the clinic, our main meeting point. By now we knew everyone would get along well and that our mission would be a success. Louise and I were dropped off at Angela Acosta's home, a neat little bungalow with a pretty yellow wrought-iron fence. Angela is widowed, but her son Manuel came home from Santo Domingo for the week in order to help her. We soon learned that another of her sons, Dr. Leo, is the doctor who works in our clinic and is funded by "Friends for Life". After a short visit we headed for bed; however, it took quite awhile for us to fall asleep. Windows contain no glass, only louvers, which are usually open because of the heat (22°C – 30°C with 98% humidity!). Noise, noise, noise is what I will remember most: loud music, barking dogs, and motorbikes well into the night followed by roosters at the crack of dawn. Thanks Eric for those custom earplugs.

Lisa had "strongly recommended" that we take slippers to wear in our host home. Now I know why. In the middle of the night I went to the washroom in my bare feet and encountered a six-inch long worm less than an eighth of an inch in diameter. The next morning we were welcomed by a four-inch long cricket sitting on the hallway floor.

Sunday November 15th

7:00 o'clock in the morning came early, but we awoke to the smell of chicken noodle soup already cooking. Soup and a yellow bread which I believe is corn meal. This was the standard fare for breakfast. Ten minutes before the 9:00 a.m. Mass was to begin, I suggested we should get moving. But Angela replied, "Don't worry there is still lots of time". Mass promptly began at about 9:40. Mass was beautiful with lots of singing and clapping between almost all the prayers. I wished I understood more Spanish. It did improve as the week went on. During Mass, I encountered my first unexplainable emotional moment. So many times during the coming week I would be moved almost to tears for no apparent reason, not sure if they were tears of joy or sadness. Dominican people are so expressive, filled with love, and always happy. At the end of the 90-minute Mass which seemed so much shorter, Father, a very jovial indigenous priest, gave the last blessing and then sat down while the mayor presented Roger with a plaque and the keys to the town.



Sunday Mass

The sisters from Consuelo had come for the day as well to help celebrate the opening of the second floor of the clinic. After the sisters and our group were introduced, all headed to the clinic for an open house. Food was served but we all remembered Gail's health warning: "Don't eat the food if you don't know who made it," so we politely declined refreshments. When we got back to the house I told Angela we hadn't eaten. She then spent almost two hours cooking a meal for us. We later learned that Angela had made the food we had refused at the open house!

After a short siesta, Louise and I arrived early for our 4:00 p.m. meeting. We got a few stares from children but then a gentleman walked by and asked two single-word questions: "Canadian? Roger?" We immediately knew we'd have no problem fitting in with the locals. Roger, the locals pronounce it with a silent "g", is a hero among the people of Yamasá.

We started unpacking once everyone was gathered. I soon learned that I didn't have to be on time and I'd still be the first one there! Louise sorted baby clothes by size while others brought her the clothing from our packed hockey bags. After much searching, Ed finally found the personal supplies that his wife had packed for him in one of the hockey bags. Much of the clothing had been packed in large plastic bags and knotted. We painstakingly undid most of the knots in order to reuse the bags. Nothing gets wasted. I'm ashamed at how wasteful we Canadians are.



The clinic in Yamasá

7:00 p.m. and it was time to head to Dr. Maria's parents, the Natividades, for supper. All of us, the sisters, our hosts, the doctors and friends, were invited for the first of many beautiful meals. The food was all Dominican fare, much of which we had never seen or tasted before. I remember in particular discovering Yuka, a white vegetable that looks like a long yam, and trajoda, a white melon-like fruit. Mel made sure to take lots of pictures of the food.

It was at this first gathering that we started to realize how dedicated and selfless everyone was. We met Dr. Leo, who works for "Friends for Life" and Dr. Maria De La Cruz. Dr. Maria worked for one year at the clinic before starting her own practice; she is expecting her first child in January. Delvis is a new doctor and a very special one. Several years ago he had spoken to Roger and said he'd like to become a doctor. Roger said he would find the necessary funding, provided that Delvis would come back to work in his community when he graduated. Delvis graduated the week before we arrived! Three other young doctors, Indira Sigaran, Kilvis Acosta, and Wagner are working part-time with Dr. Leo as they learn the practical side of treating patients. I think it's sort of an intern program. Sister Noelia, Sister Mercedes RN and Carmen RN are three of the

most important people who keep the clinic running. In recognition of her many years of work the addition that was built to the clinic has been dedicated to Carmen.

That night we slept well. Angela had assured us we'd get a better night's sleep because of the rain. No barking dogs, no music and no motorbikes.

Monday November 16th

The rain ended by morning, and the roosters woke us up before 6:00. At 8:00 we arrived at the clinic but the locals, and even some of our group, didn't start arriving until forty-five minutes later. I had to forget my regimented schedule and adopt "Dominican Republic time". We met more of the staff, then Louise and I visited the lab upstairs where we learned a "sanitary handshake" -- touching the back of my wrist to the back of the other person's wrist. The rest of the morning Roger, Mel and I started gathering dental equipment and chair parts in hopes that we could set up the donated dental chair. Other people continued stacking medicine on the shelves of the clinic. Some counted vitamins into small plastic bags, twenty in each, and loaded them into large toolkit-like carrying cases to prepare for the next day's mobile clinic in the batey. By now we'd all learned to drink lots of water, at least two liters a day, bare minimum. With temperatures near 30°C and very high humidity it didn't take much to make us sweat.

Angela, although she is principal of a vocational education school, has a two-hour break for lunch, enough time to cook up a delicious, warm meal. After a siesta, we spent another two hours completing the unpacking. It was so gratifying to see all the shelves that had been bare for over a month before we arrived now filled with medicine, vitamins, syringes, dressings and many other clinical supplies. At 5:00 p.m. the thirteen of us along with Sister Neolia retired to the "upper room" and shared our views on the topic "why are we here". Unfortunately outside noise was so loud and distracting that it was difficult to hear everything. How I longed for peace and quiet.



Me (in yellow shirt) in the clinic lab with one of the technicians

Supper that evening was at Rosa Antonia's (Miriun's) house. Once again we were presented with a wonderful spread of typical local cuisine. The whole gang was there as it would be every night. What a great way to build relationship and team spirit.

Tuesday November 17th

We were introduced to the poor in the first batey, Los Jovillos. About 9:00 a.m. (make sure to be there at 8:00!) we piled into three trucks. Some rode in the front and the rest of us in the back. I

found it much easier on the body to stand and hold onto the truck's roof racks. We arrived at a local hall, pulled in and started setting up the clinic. Doctors were located at one end of the building, and the pharmacy at the other. As word got out that we were there, women, children, and the elderly, many of whom were crippled, started arriving. I soon learned how important it was to be involved with each person who came. For some just a handshake was appreciated, for others a hug was called for, and in another case one lady leaned against me and I helped her walk to the clinic.

Each morning thirty to forty people would be seen. Currently Dr. Leo only gets out to each of the bateyes once a month but plans are in place to increase the frequency of his visits. To arrive at this batey, we drove past vast open garbage dumps located on the side of the road and we drove through the river right next to people cleaning themselves or their clothing in the muddy water.

As the clinic got rolling, Louise fell in love with her first little girl. No sooner had Louise given

the girl a hair elastic when two more little girls appeared from out of the woods. As the boys arrived, I quickly learned that the hair elastics could double as wrist bracelets. Yes, necessity really is the mother of invention. By the time fifty



Louise and I handing out toys

young school children were following Louise, she had learned the Spanish phrase “line up”. At the same time I discovered that the schoolteacher spoke Creole (no, not French, but Creole as I quickly learned). This was a godsend for me since I only knew a few words of Spanish. My Spanish continued to improve as the week progressed, often thanks to Dean Martin's songs, which would pop into my head: “cuando, cuando, cuando” and “a me esposa con amour”. We got the children singing for us and they even did a couple of action songs. When the singing finished and the children started “mobbing” Louise, Eric quickly took her packsack and disappeared with the remaining gifts. So went our first lesson in sharing with children. Fortunately we had hundreds of hair elastics. An advantage to putting them on their wrists was that we were able to see who already had one.

Once Dr. Leo's associates starting seeing people, he and a couple of us walked through the batey looking for those who were bedridden. At each of the bateyes there was one local Haitian who was the woman in charge and able to help us find those who needed attention. Leo would lovingly greet each patient, help him or her up, and hug him. Some were lying on the floor of their 8 X 10 home, while others rested outside under a tree. Leo would leave vitamins with some, antibiotics with others and administer the odd injection. By 1:00 p.m. we had packed up and were back at our host homes for lunch and a siesta.



Lady with one leg, a crutch and a cane. Her house is in the background



The lady we drove to "find" and change her dressing

After 3:00 some of us headed out with Leo to look for a lady who had previously been treated at the clinic. Riding in the back of the truck, it took me awhile to figure out that Leo wasn't really sure where we were going. He'd drive up a road, turn around and come back, talk to someone and then head off in another direction. Along the way we stopped to see local farmers harvesting cacao beans. Eventually we found a gentleman who told us our lady lived "up the 30° hill" and that "the rain has washed out the road and we better turn back". It was then that I first appreciated why the doctors drive 4 X 4's. We crossed

the creek with water up over the wheels, and gunned the engine as the hill came into sight. The first run failed but the second was successful.

More than an hour after we started our search we arrived at our destination. The elderly lady broke down in tears and said something like, "You came all the way here for me?" The inside of her ulcerated leg had no skin from the knee down to the ankle. Dr. Leo changed the dressing, dispensed medication, gave her a hug and that was it. That day I learned just how dedicated the staff is. Leo is on call 24/7.

While all this was happening, Louise found eight little children, a much more controllable group, whom she entertained, giving each a page from a colouring book, a crayon and a Fruit-to-go. We were able to communicate enough with the two mothers to find out that the baby in the first mother's arms was three months old and the other mother was four months pregnant. It was then that I began to appreciate and respect these women as never before. Whether a mother raised her top to feed her baby, or if another woman's top was a little low, these women were simply beautiful to behold and admire as God's creatures. What a contrast to North American culture.

By 5:00 p.m. we returned to the "upper room" and began to share our day's experiences. Supper that evening was at Aeralis's home where three generations live in harmony. When the

electricity failed, Aeralis' father ran to the neighbour and borrowed a generator so that we could see a slide show about how Aeralis had started an agriculture program in the batey that we would visit the next day. This would prove to be very useful in helping us appreciate the good that is happening in the Antonci batey.

Wednesday November 18th

Each morning seemed to come a little earlier but by this day we had things down to a routine and I finally learned to be late, but was never the last to arrive. Carmen and Sister Noelia were there when the doctors eventually arrived and we piled into the trucks to head for the Antonci batey. This batey impressed me the most. I immediately noticed there was a higher level of organization there. Even the children were more patient and didn't stampede me when I pulled out the "Fruit-to-go" strips, but perhaps that is because I'm not Louise. All of the children sat patiently beside their mothers until I gestured to one of them. He or she would come forward, accept my gift, perhaps ask me to open it and then return to their mother's side.

It was here that I met a man with a badly crippled leg. It reminded me how much I have to be thankful for in my personal journey with cerebral palsy. Others asked but were denied the privilege to take his picture but he happily responded "si" to my request. I took a long walk with Dr. Indira to deliver medicine to another elderly gentleman. He lived in an 8 X 10 concrete shack containing only a bed, a pot and a gallon can used for cooking over a fire. This man was starved and sick. As soon as he received IV and one of the ladies gave him a blanket his eyes brightened up, he smelled the blanket's freshness and put it under his head. We also gave him two granola bars.



Inside a Haitian shack, mattress on right

On the way back to the clinic an elderly lady motioned to me for help. Obviously in pain, she leaned against me and we walked together. Just as I was becoming concerned about getting lost she said "gracias" and sat down on the step of a bright blue shack. I felt I had just seen the face of Jesus, something I had never experienced before. This was one of the most memorable events of my week. I learned that God is always there to plan each move if we only let him.

I then visited the local school, which had received help from Acceso International, an Ottawa organization founded by Roger & Gail's daughter-in-law, Christine. Its mission is to improve education in Latin America. Acceso had provided funding for security improvements at the school. The property was completely surrounded by a chain-link fence topped with spiraling, jagged-edged steel. A volunteer parent who was on security duty opened the gate for us and graciously showed us around. The sad thing here was that the water well no longer worked because of the unavailability of replacement parts and the lack of maintenance expertise. We

learned here, in Antonci, how very important it is not to simply throw money at them but rather teach them a degree of self-sufficiency. The proud teacher showed us her classroom, her library and spent time telling us all about the program through the assistance of Lisa who translated her Spanish. Meanwhile a group of students were busy cleaning their metal dishes, cups and spoons. Several of the schools have initiated a program to feed the students. Often the food received at school will be their only rations for the day. All students wore uniforms. This is not only an economical way of clothing the children, but also eliminates competition and clearly identifies the students.



School Children at Antonci Batey

of Eden. We walked carefully to avoid stepping on smaller ground plants. He climbed up a tree, cut a couple of coconuts, slid back down the trunk and cut the tops off so we could sample the refreshing taste of coconut milk. He showed us his mandarin and cacao trees under the mighty coconuts, offered us fresh mandarins and then showed us the beans that were growing close to the ground. With his machete he harvested yucca from the plant he pulled from the earth. It was amazing to see how diversified his crops were; yet all shared the same plot of land. Finally he showed us his chicken / rabbit coop.



Proud couple who are part of the agricultural program started by Aeralis

As the staff and two of the trucks packed up and moved on to a second clinic at Guasimita Batey, a few of us and the third truck stayed behind and followed one of the local men to see his agricultural project, the one that Aeralis had spoken about the previous evening. We crouched to pass through a hole in the hedge being careful not to get hooked on the barbed wire immediately overhead, and we were treated to a most wonderful sight. The man proudly showed us his garden

Until now we had only seen free-range chickens. It was now that I became acutely aware of the extensive use of barbed wire, not only for the animals but for security against intruders. Even in town, wrought-iron fencing surrounds most middle class houses. At night, cars were brought into the yard and gates were closed or even locked. It was quite apparent that people had learned from past political turmoil as well as the current rise in the drug trade, how to protect themselves.



Haitian children singing for us

At 11:30 it was off to the Guasimita Batey to join the rest of our group. What particularly bothered me there was a woman begging for pesos. Until now everyone had been very grateful for our help. This batey didn't seem as well organized as the previous two. I also noted here the presence of various religious affiliations. The clinic was set up in the local multi-denominational chapel. On the way back to town the Toyota had a flat.

Fortunately, the second truck stopped and some of us helped change the tire. The first truck's jack wasn't working. An even balder tire replaced the flat and we continued on. People make do with what they have and no one complains. They always had smiles on their faces accentuated by their white teeth against their dark skin.

Back to town for lunch and a siesta before we met at the clinic to hand out baby-care packages consisting of cloth diapers, clothing, toothbrushes, a baby blanket and perhaps sheets, socks and anything else we were able to gather together from our much valued Canadian, mostly Pembroke, donations. Local deprived Dominican women and children started arriving about 3:45 pm, and sat patiently until the waiting room was full. Some walked while other women with their babies arrived on the back of motorcycles. I was assigned two mothers to whom I presented care packages. After presenting one to each of them I spent time communicating with those mothers, sometimes with just a smile and a hug. I also played on the floor with the children who were old enough to crawl or toddle. Earlier in the week the women from our group prepared seventy-eight care-packages all from the donations brought from Canada. Others were handed out in each of the bateyes during our visit.

For a break we then toured a cacao factory. Our guide, through the translation of Dr. Maria patiently took us through the different stages of cacao production after which we purchased raw cacao and cacao liquor that tasted similar to sherry. Until now I had limited my alcohol consumption to local beer. This factory practiced recycling to the point that it even burned the scrap cacao shells to power the steam turbines that provided electricity for the factory. Maria's father had donated the land for this factory. Security did not go unnoticed. The armed guard was proud to raise his rifle and grant me a picture. We saw guards at other places who weren't quite so friendly. Apparently the landowners do not look favourably on our helping the families of their workers. Perhaps they are concerned that we will educate the people and they will become a threat to the sugar cane operation. Lately, because of the reduced world demand for sugar cane, there is much unemployment.

Back at the clinic, after quickly sharing our experiences of the day, we went to Miguel's father's house for supper. Miguel senior explained to us that his grandfather had built the walls twice the normal thickness "so that bullets could not go through". He has lived in this house all his life. It was here that we were served a very well-aged bottle of rum. Miguel's mother makes about 400 cakes a year in her home business so naturally we had some pretty good desserts along with the drinks.

That evening Dr. Wagner stayed over with us at Angela's so we didn't have to worry about being late the next morning. He drove us. Cars seem to last forever in the Dominican Republic and people take good care of them. Most popular are Japanese and Korean models. We only saw one or two large North American cars. Perhaps that's because they'd be too hard to maneuver and it would be difficult to avoid striking pedestrians and motorbikes.

Thursday November 20th

Today our visit to the El Caño Batey was a bit of a shock to me. Up until now people had been very appreciative, polite and happy. I found a small group of children, pulled out my thirty or so remaining Fruit-to-go bars and started handing them to eager little hands. Several of the mothers held out their hands as well. I ignored them until I realized they were taking them from the children and eating them. If they were hungry surely they would have at least shared with the children. To see this happening was for me a most disconcerting experience. I felt weak and must have turned white because Lisa asked, "Are you feeling O.K., Dick? Sit down and relax." Several highly critical thoughts went through my mind until I said to myself, "Who am I to judge"?



Drs. Indiria, Leo & Delvis (left to right) setting up I.V. for a sick gentleman laying outside

Just then doctors Leo and Delvis were heading out on their rounds and asked me to join them. The first patient was an elderly, dehydrated gentleman lying on his bed under a tree. He was so weak that Leo had to pick him up to reposition him. His skin was so leathery and his veins were so small that it took quite some time to find a vein. The IV was inserted and Leo asked for something to tie the IV bag to the tree. Someone offered a shoelace and the procedure was eventually completed. In cases such as this the doctor instructed someone from the community on how to remove the

needle. Next we visited a lady with cataracts. Dr. Leo decided that if she had them removed it would improve her quality of life, as she was reasonably healthy otherwise. But as Leo

explained, in a lot of cases, cataract removal does not significantly improve one's quality of life. Due to limited resources he has to make the painful decision as to who will receive surgery. There just wouldn't be enough resources to do everyone. We continued our rounds, administered one injection and distributed vitamins and medicine to the rest of the shut-ins.

Dr. Leo has a great talent for painting, so after the clinic closed he took Louise, Don, Mel and I to see his private clinic located in a neighbouring town. There he showed us his paintings which hung on every wall in the place. His clinic, where he has a full-time assistant doctor, is like a mini hospital with a two-bed "ward", an examination table, and a consulting room with air conditioning! Louise and I bought his tiger painting which stole our hearts.

Leo, Delvis, and Indira joined us for lunch and conversation chez Angela. I should mention that Delvis's French is as fluent as his English so he appreciated the opportunity to practice his third language. This served us all well. When we couldn't communicate clearly in one language, one of the other two usually filled the need.

Until now, wherever we went everyone was poor with most of the poor people being Haitian. This afternoon we would deliver food packages to the local poor in Yamasá. We broke into groups of two or three accompanied by one of the staff and three high school students who were asked to carry the packages. My group first visited an elderly couple. The woman sat in her darkened shack while the disabled man sat in the backyard near their makeshift cooking stove. He had only one tooth and what appeared to be no gums. We communicated with them through touch, gestures and our trusty translator. Before leaving each home we offered a prayer. I was elected to lead. The second lady, 79 years old and blind, was very talkative and didn't want us to leave. It was at times like this that I wished I had a better handle on the Spanish language. We then visited Cassandra, an amazing hunchbacked lady who could not leave her bed. She would bend over the side of the bed, scrub her clothing in a metal pan, and then hang the items on a pole which she stuck out the window to dry. Cassandra showed us some of the intricate crocheting that she did. Fecunda, a lady perhaps in her forties, was the last visit on our list. Having recovered from breast cancer she was now receiving chemotherapy for another cancer that she was fighting. She was proud to show us her medication. Despite all this she seemed very young, alive and animated, a real inspiration for all of us. She knew of us from past visits by "Friends for Life". Fecunda sadly passed away three weeks after our visit leaving behind three children.

Back in the "upper room" we talked about the contrasts between the poor of the batey and the local poor. Then it was supper at "our place". By now Angela was calling us her children.

Friday November 21st

In an effort to show us a little bit of the country's culture, we boarded the bus and played tourist in Santo Domingo. We got some great views of the Caribbean sea, walked under the towering palms and visited the oldest church in the new world, the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, initially built soon after Columbus arrived here to discover the Americas. Afterwards Louise and I were assigned to Indira, our guide, who took care of us like a mother. More than once when I stepped out onto the street she pulled me back just in time to avoid a motorbike or car. We walked along the old city's main street, and were pestered by local peddlers. We bartered the price of our few souvenirs down to half the initial price. Pesos and

American dollars were both accepted. At the end of the street, we visited the National Memorial where there were three statues of the three men found on the 100-peso note. Before heading home, our bus stopped at a supermarket, strikingly similar to a Wal-Mart, where we purchased coffee, vanilla and “nutmeg”, which turned out to be allspice, and various liquors. All were priced far below Canadian prices.

Back home at 5:00 we packed to leave the next morning. An hour later, Angela who usually goes to supper with us, still wasn't home and it was getting dark. Tonight was fiesta night and we didn't want to be late. Knowing that Dr. Kilvis lived on the block, we talked to the neighbour who was outside. She indicated that Kilvis lived three doors up. Kilvis's mother who speaks no English came to the door. Through a series of charades we got her to try phoning Kilvis, then Angela and then Rosa Hermenia. No luck, so we said “Rosa Hermenia fiesta”. She said “uno momento”, put her dog in the back room, locked the gate and walked us to the fiesta. As it was dark, she became very protective and made certain that we didn't get run over by the motorbikes, especially the ones with no headlights. And, by the way, there are no streetlights and so each of us made it a habit to carry a flashlight. After good food, drink, and dancing we bedded down later than usual, so the 4:30 alarm was needed to get us up and ready for the bus.

Saturday November 22nd

After a few crackers, peanut butter and a juice we were ready just in time when the bus honked at 5:30 a.m. – hey, it was on time and thank goodness. Sitting in the front seat, I was able to snap a few pictures of the landscape as well as a variety of motorcycles laden with loads that were bigger than the bikes and sometimes eight feet wide. We had a brief twenty-minute stop at the convent in Consuelo for a quick glass of juice and a cheese sandwich. Sister Susan and her nephew Bernard joined us for the rest of the trip. Back on the road, we arrived at the airport just in time to check in and head to the plane. Several of our hosts had made the trip with us and we were hoping to say proper goodbyes, but they quickly passed us drinks and crackers, hugged us and said goodbye. Five minutes after we boarded the airplane the door was closed and West jet flight 2813 prepared for takeoff.

Perhaps that wasn't such a bad way to say goodbye, as it would have been even harder if we had had time to think about it.

Adios, hasta luego Yamasá, until next year.

“Friends for Life” is a non-profit charitable organization with almost no overhead. All the work is done by volunteers who fund their own airfare and other travel expenses. The work they do in the bateyes of the Dominican Republic is indispensable as I hope my diary has illustrated.

If you wish to support this cause your tax receiptable donations can be sent to:

Friends for Life
c/o Celine Britton
402 Centre Street
Pembroke, ON K8A 1J6

For further information please contact Dick Fiala at dickfiala@rogers.com