

El Espejo (the mirror): A visit to the Dominican Republic

Marcelina Rivera, Executive Director, Latino Community Foundation of Colorado, Rose Community Foundation



Who gets to be a citizen? What are the rights and responsibilities of a citizen (for example, to vote, to pay taxes, to take care of less fortunate citizens or residents within one's border)? These are central questions in an emerging democracy. One of the discoveries for me as an exchange partner with Civitas to the D.R. is that these remain the central questions in an established democracy, as well. In this respect, there were more parallels than differences between the D.R. and the U.S.

The history of the D.R. is one of colonialism and slavery, of dictatorships and a recent struggle for democracy. The U.S. shares a history of colonialism, slavery, and hard won independence as well. Both countries grapple to make sense of an ideal of democracy on paper and its reality in practice in the towns and villages of the nation. Slaves, women, and minorities each fought for their liberty in the U.S., and for protection under the Constitution—like other minorities continue to do now. While our Constitution is being reinterpreted in cases before the Supreme Court each year, and new laws enacted in Congress, the DR is undergoing an historic event this month (March 2009), the rewriting of their constitution. There was much excitement about the process, as well as, skepticism among the folks we spoke with. One of our colleagues, a Supreme Court Justice from Oklahoma, noted that it wasn't until 2002 that the DR Supreme Court exercised Judicial Review for the first time. There were many areas open to change in the Constitution and speculation as to how political the process would be. We were reminded that the DR operated under a constitution during the Trujillo dictatorship, and that it has been rewritten many times. While voter participation is high in the D.R., participation in other civic organizations is low, as is a general knowledge of the constitution. Most citizens have never seen the constitution and students rarely study it, which is why the Teachers Forum we attended in Santo Domingo was a heartening experience. Through this constitutional program, similar to our We The People program, teachers were being trained for the first time about the Constitution so that they would be able to teach it to their students. If there was any temptation to look down from our U.S. democratic high horse on another country's progress, the gentle questions of our hosts (who were much more familiar with our history than we were of theirs) regarding certain periods of U.S. history—slavery, the Civil War, McCarthyism, Vietnam, Nixon) put us soundly back in the grooming stall. Democracy is a hard and messy business, whatever stage you are in, wherever you are in the world.

While the D.R. struggles with its relationship with its bordering neighbor, Haiti, and what to do with Haitian immigrants—legal and illegal—so the U.S. struggles with its neighbor, Mexico. As U.S. citizens, we have no consensus on immigration. We hate and need immigrants at the same time. To say the viewpoints divide neatly between party lines, with Democrats inclined to be pro-immigrant and Republicans anti-immigrant, is false. Within parties, within communities, within families, and even within ourselves we struggle with the question of who should be allowed the golden lottery ticket of U.S. citizenship with all of its rights. We want the door to citizenship to be open for as long as we go through it, then to shut it once we've gotten through it. This has made us a nation of the privileged, not unlike the

way the privileged classes live all throughout the world, including Latin America. We often take our citizenship for granted. I am reminded of this when I am with my immigrant friends. Perhaps citizenship is like money: only one who doesn't have it truly knows its value.

What is the responsibility of privilege? To ask this of ourselves and others, we must first ask: Where does the concept of responsibility come from in the first place? Our DR partners answered both questions with the same answer: from moral or religious sources. It is the responsibility, for example, for all Catholics to help the poor, "the least among us," like Jesus did. This becomes the basis of charitable giving to the church, as well as, to family members in need. This is Latin American philanthropy. Charity is embedded and carried out by the institutions of family and church. This value of helping the poor is taught in the home, in church, and often in school in religion courses. Unlike the U.S., there is no separation of church and state in the DR. Consequently, they are able to teach values and ethics from a moral and religious perspective in schools.

How do we teach values in the U.S.? How are they carried out or enforced? While some of our citizens learn values at their respective places of worship and at home, we attempt to teach morals and values from a secular point of view, often using the pervasive method, in schools and universities. We even teach ethics as far down the personal developmental line as the workplace. Charity, caring for "the least among us" is embedded in our state and national governmental institutions. Of course, there is charity among families and in churches, but the burden of caring for indigent U.S. citizens, at least since the Great Depression, has become embedded in the government. Not all U.S. citizens agree with carrying this burden, however, and there exists ongoing debate as to if, how much, and to whom aid should be given.

As a lawyer and teacher who now works in philanthropy the exchange was enlightening. Travel allows us to hold a mirror to our own culture. We may think we are farther along the democratic continuum, only to recognize that we as citizens in the U.S. struggle with issues similar to those of the citizens of the D.R.—What do we do about a struggling education system? How do I express dissent? Does my vote really matter? What do I do when I've lost faith in our leaders, in our government to solve the problems of the society? What can we do about corruption and greed? One of my colleagues on this exchange was a public defender. He was surprised to discover the amount of respect given to a *defensor público* in the D.R., similar to that of a judge. This was a marked contrast to the disdain with which we treat these public servants in our own legal system. Perhaps it is because this system of defense is relatively new in the Dominican Republic and seen as a valued protection of rights—at least among the citizens with which we visited. What has happened in our country to the spirit of fairness written into law in the *Gideon vs. Wainwright* decision (372 U.S. 335 (1963)) which required that poor criminal defendants be provided counsel at trial according to our Sixth and Fourteenth Amendments? It was this case that created the public defender system in the U.S., a system now so swamped with cases that many offices around the country are refusing to take new clients lest they be bordering on ineffective according *The New York Times*. We had three colleagues from Michigan on the exchange—Michigan requires counties to defend the accused, but it does not provide any state funds to do so. Some criminal justice experts believe public defense is deteriorating around the country, which could lead to innocent clients pressured to plead guilty or convicted due to a weak defense. For all that we have gained moving "ahead" on the democratic continuum, perhaps we have lost some things along the way, as well.

I see now how intertwined my work in citizenship and philanthropy is; I live in a country in which the government, foundations, schools, churches, and individuals partner to serve those in need within our borders and beyond. This partnership doesn't always work, there are often holes in the system, as well as bitter differences among those helping on how best to give or solve the problems of our society. But it is a debate and endeavor (of reform and service) that remains alive. We have more nonprofits in our country than any other, perhaps a testament to both our civic engagement and our "audacity of hope." We can do more to light the fire of civic education and participation—we must do more if we want to grow and advance as a society—these current times of change are times of opportunity to do just that. This exchange and the mirror it provided relit that old flame within me. It reminded me of something I knew but needed to be reminded of: democracy is not a spectator sport.

Postscript:

You had asked what ideas I might have on collaborations between our countries that might benefit both. I thought about this and remembered the exchanges which mattered the most to me, which changed my mind and heart were the most direct ones. If we want to teach students about citizenship or comparative democracies, why don't we have the students of each country correspond with one another, or use Skype, on the issues of voting, participation, civic education, ideas for solving problems in their schools and communities? Perhaps each class has a base curriculum they begin with (The U.S. Political System/The DR Political System) which culminates in this peer exchange/teaching component where one class teaches the other what they know.