



COURTESY VICTOR TEJERA

**A World of Difference:** FGCU Spanish Club members Victor Tejera and Ilianet Suarez work to educate underprivileged children in the Dominican Republic while teaching them life skills.

# The Language of Love

## Spanish club makes Dominican kids smile

By Jenna Tighe, editorial assistant

When the vibrant Spanish tunes of merengue or bachata blast from speakers, most dancers find it hard to resist. They're so focused on the song's beat that their mind forgets everything else except the music—unless the dancer is a member of Florida Gulf Coast University's Spanish Club.

For the last five years, this club has raised enough funds for its members to take a yearly trip to the Dominican Republic for an entire week. This year, the club has planned a dance to celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month and also to help raise money for the trip. Once in the Dominican Republic, these students take off their dancing shoes and roll up their sleeves so they can help the underprivileged children there. Club members spend their free time in nightclubs, dancing to the country's traditional rhythms.

Thirty club members make the yearly trip to the Dominican Republic during FGCU's spring break. The students spend all of their time in Santiago, the Dominican Republic's second largest city and home to its largest university, donating their time to the communities of Accion Callejera and La Otra Banda. The club focuses on the children of

these two communities.

"It's not what the Spanish club does for the Dominican Republic—it's what we do for the kids. In previous years, we went to help reconstruct and build homes. In later trips, we realized that we wanted to work with the kids—the future of the Dominican Republic," says Blanca Fernandez, the Spanish club's president. "Children are the future, and teaching them to do the right things, such as keeping the environment clean, getting an education, and not stealing is what will make the Dominican Republic successful in the future."

In *La Otra Banda*, the students work in an elementary school. "There are 50 children to one classroom and one teacher in most of the Dominican Republic," says Victor Tejera, public relations officer and five-time veteran of the trip. "And we are the ones who complain about overcrowded classrooms. It really makes you think."

The club members form stations, each one helping the children in a specific area. For example, the reading and writing station helps the kids write short stories. Before the club came to help, many of the children had difficulty just writing their own names. In past years, the club tried teaching the children to respect their environment and to help clean it up. "I witnessed a 7-year-old girl who participated in the environmental project pick up

garbage on the floor," says Bianny Fernandez, a member of the club. "She confessed to me that after our last trip, children no longer throw their garbage on the ground like they used to. The children had even planted a small garden in their school's yard to surprise the club."

The second community FGCU's Spanish club helps is called *Accion Callejera*, where they target street kids earning money by shining people's shoes. Club members bring these children things they desperately need like school materials or musical instruments. "We assess their needs by just asking them what they need. They tell us what they'd like us to do, and that's what we do," says Ingrid Martinez-Rico, the club's advisor. "We don't go there imposing what we think they need. We're really very aware of development issues."

Students also tour the surrounding communities so they can get a feel for what life is really like for these children they've grown so attached to. They spent one day in *Hoyo de Elias*, a community center in a very poor neighborhood of *Accion Callejera*. "Most of the houses surrounding the school were of very poor condition, and the school was even worse. It was more like a heated box with no air conditioning, and the floor was crumbling apart," says club member Cynthia Reyes. "With massive holes in the floor, one had to watch where they placed their chair. Unfortunately, this is where about 50 5- to 8-year-olds went to class."

The best thing this club provides for these impoverished children is love. Students form relationships with them, and one reason they keep attending the trip is to see the children grow up. Almost every member tells a story about a particular child appreciating their help and support and how it deeply affected them. "I remember the first year I went on the trip, one of the little girls gave me a Daisy Duck toy," Fernandez says. "Even though she didn't have much, she wanted me to have it. The love they give you is great." Tejera also has a child he's taken special interest in over the years. "When I first met Felipe on my first trip to the Dominican Republic, he was a very shy 6-year-old. I have seen him grow not only physically, but also spiritually and emotionally," Tejera says. "He's a talented young musician who plays the *tambora*, a drum, in a band with his brother and cousin. Each year, he plays for all of us."

FGCU's Spanish club plans to continue the Dominican Republic trip. Many of the members say they can't go anywhere else because they've made connections there, and they want to see these children grow up, hopefully with better lives. 🐦

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