

When Christopher Columbus came ashore in 1492, he wrote in his diary, “This is the most beautiful land that human eyes have seen.” He would leave members of his family behind to colonize the island and would return to it after venturing throughout the Caribbean. In his will, he asked to be buried in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. It was to this island a group of 22, mostly graduate nursing students and faculty from University of San Diego (www.sandiego.edu), along with one dentist, would travel as a mission endeavor, to improve the health of school children of a rural school.



Excitement ran high as the emails & g-mails flashed back and forth, final arranges were gelling into a final plan. Were we actually going to the Caribbean? Over six months in the planning, and after 8 prior visits to La Republica Dominicana (Dominican Republic in English, indigenous Taino Indians called it Quisqueya), the trip was finally coming to fruition. It was decided that now was the time to include dental care in the overall plan to help the needy families far into the mountainous area near the international border with Haiti. Destination, El Cercado, to work at the school, *Fe y Alegria* (“Faith and Gladness”); the goal, examine students and their families in health screening as well as undertake a couple of research projects, one having to do with new techniques for diagnosing diabetes compared to traditional methods. But after having seen the severe need in oral disease, this was the year to begin inclusion of emergency dental care.



After being referred by the San Diego County Dental Society, I met with Dr. Susan Bonnell of the University of San Diego’s Hahn School of Nursing and Health Sciences. She expressed a need in an investigative trip for emergency dental care and assessing the need for restorative dental care in future visits. The Caribbean? I used to live there, and when I left, part of my heart stayed there! Mission trip? That’s what I do now for “a living” (a life). La Republica Dominicana? Wow, one of my favorite island cultures! I told her I’d think about it for a while, and after about 30 seconds (or less), I told her I’d be happy to help. And plans began, and the association of working together has been wonderful.

The USD Hahn School of Nursing and Health Sciences was a “dark horse” to me in the San Diego area. I was blown away to find that many students already with bachelor’s degrees can enter into nursing and obtain a master’s degree/RN as they shift their career into caring for others in the nursing field. Susan Bonnell, PhD, RN, is in charge of this program, and the outreach trip to the Caribbean, which began 9 years ago.

La Republica Dominicana is one of the greater Antilles in the Caribbean archipelago, up at the top of the chain, on the eastern 2/3 of the very large island of Hispaniola (Haiti occupies the western third). It is the second largest island in the Caribbean after Cuba. In 1492, Christopher Columbus (Cristobal Colon in Spanish) first stopped in Guanahani (the Bahamas), skirted the north shore of Cuba, initially mistaking it for Japan, and turning east at the large mountainous island he named, “La Isla Espanola” (the Spanish Island),



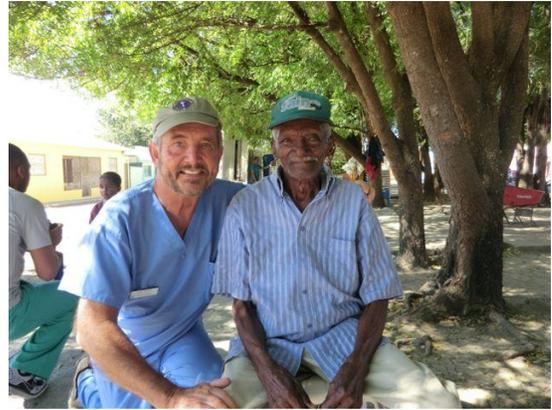
some, but the need is greater. We scratched the surface in El Cercado by helping at “Fe y Alegria” school, and hopefully more can be accomplished on this annual mission with additional dental providers helping in this much needed effort.

Part of our hearts stayed with these beautiful people



who need so much, but are always happy with what life has given. Gratitude for life was seen in every face. As we left El Cercado, we realized why the Dominicans refer to their island as “La tierra que mas

amo Colon” (the land Columbus loved the most).



My personal thanks to the wonderful group of health care providers who are so willing to give to those who need so much:



For more information, please contact Dr. Susan Bonnell (sbonnell@sandiego.edu) or Dr. Ronaldo Fritz (ronaldefritz.dds@gmail.com)