

Health in Action News

~Reflections & On the Horizon~



ISSUE 2



A note from the editor~Brad Detjen

Rancho al Medio is colorful, vibrant, and full of life. The scent of the sea breeze mingles with the squawks of chickens while schoolchildren in bright blue uniforms chase each other around buildings that dance with color. When we finished the first draft of this newsletter, it failed to convey the vivacity of our experience – so we scrapped it and started over. We sent out a call for personal anecdotes and reflections, and they soon came pouring in. The Dominican Republic has touched our lives in a way that no official report could capture. The new contributions display the various ways in which we were affected.

Among other things, the trip provided some perspective on our first-world way of life. While we call ourselves wealthy, I cannot express the unique spiritual richness that radiated from the worn, crinkled smiles of the women and the eager eyes of children in the schoolhouse. Life is deeply different on this island – American ideas of time, friendship, ownership, and success have little relevance. Wealth, too, is deeply different. We cannot judge and we cannot assume. But we bridge the divide with smiles and dance and holding hands. We cannot thank our sponsors enough for helping us to have this invaluable experience.



Weee're Baack!~Dave Stile

We have now returned from this year's trip to Rancho al Medio in the Dominican Republic where we set out to confront a range of issues in the community. As usual, the community was excited to see us. We certainly enjoyed our time with them as well. This year's trip presented a new set of challenges for our organization. As can be expected with any community, Rancho al Medio is constantly evolving, which challenges Health in Action to adapt its mission to their changing needs. In the past, our programs

focused on rounding up groups of people to whom we presented information about health issues such as HIV, substance abuse, and pregnancy. We attempted to change our approach this year, although some of the modules were thematically the same. Realizing that we only had a week to spend with the community, we tried to make our presentations' programs dynamic through the encouragement of one-on-one discussions and collective learning.

~Please see Leader's Note on page 2 for complete article.

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Leader's Note ~ Dave Stile (continued from page 1)

A greater focus on intercultural dialogue was a vital change this year. Our objective is not to present information with the mindset that we know what is correct, but rather to learn about community members' experiences and knowledge and share some of our own. The shift to this approach was also crucial because it is no longer as simple to find adults roaming in the community, making large-group education difficult.

Fewer and fewer adults seem to be present in the community during the weekdays. This is both encouraging and discouraging. It's a sign that the people are finding ways to get money and support their families. However, we are concerned that business ideas and innovation may not be coming from within the community but from outside. The business education module reported that some of Rancho's most successful local businesses are not owned by locals. Furthermore, the migration for work outside of the community means that there are fewer adults present to give the kids in the community attention, leaving some children to fend for themselves.

As we experienced in the past, the children were ready and waiting every day for our arrival and they yearned for our attention until the moment we left. We worked extensively with the children this year, reiterating

information from the past and teaching them some English that they requested to learn last year. By the end of the week we had many kids asking "How are you?" and "What's your name?" Hearing these words come out of the kids' mouths after I was tending to other business matters during the daytime was a huge and heartwarming surprise.

The community is beginning to reach a point where our help is no longer necessary. Community members are increasingly working together, and there is even a neighborhood association that has formed with some very passionate community leaders. As a result, Health In Action is in the process of looking for other communities who need our assistance in becoming empowered and learning the basics about health. This year's trip showed that we have made some great strides over the years and a great deal of the information we have shared has been retained. We thank everyone who helped sponsor this year's trip that showed that Health In Action has been succeeding in their efforts down south. It was certainly another learning experience that will make our organization stronger and more successful in the future. I hope that some of our members' experiences shared in this month's newsletter may provide a glimpse into how this organization changes the lives of our members and the people of Rancho al Medio.



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Business & Microcredit ~ Juan Andrés Panamá

When we first started planning and working on the business and microcredit survey, we never thought that the social and cultural dynamics of the community would play such a significant role in the development of businesses in the area. At first, the plan was to survey as many community members as possible and understand their perspective and knowledge of business and microcredit. However, there were several obstacles to this process. The majority of the community members did not seem to have the motivation, ideas, or resources to start a new business, most of them did not know what microcredit was, and most importantly, they did not live in the community except for the weekends.

Given these results, we changed our approach to the survey and the program. We realized that what the community members needed was something that would stimulate their curiosity on starting a small business. We started researching the established businesses in Rancho al Medio and analyzed possible small business opportunities using the available resources in the community. We came across two small shops that sold food, vegetables and fruits. The first store had been established about 30 years ago and its revenue was so small that the size of the store had only increased by around 18 square feet. The second shop had a more positive story. This store was opened two years ago and

it was opened using a loan from a bank. The owner had already repaid his loan and was looking to expand his business in the near future. The next establishments we visited were a pottery business and a bee farm, the only businesses in the community that seemed to be exporting their goods. We were disappointed to find that these two businesses had another thing in common: they were owned by people outside Rancho al Medio. To our disappointment, the workers were only paid to create the product, instead of being active entrepreneurs.

This last part of our program, combined with more conversations with the community members and the results from the water purification program, allowed us to come up with a future plan that could have much more positive and fruitful results. Our future plan is to come up with ideas and solutions of our own and present them to the community as opportunities to open small businesses using microcredit. We think this will work because, as we saw with the water purification, the people from Rancho al Medio need strong proof that something will work or benefit them in order to be motivated and willing to make the effort to improve their lives.

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Water Purification ~ Lynn Williams

In 2004, HIA in collaboration with BLUElab conducted a quality assessment of drinking water sources in the Rancho Al Medio and they found high levels of contamination. Previous HIA engineering teams traveled to the community and implemented two type of point-of-use systems: Biosand filters and dual-bucket systems. The Biosand filter was a design life of 50 years while the dual-bucket system has a design life of 2 years. Due to infrequent communication with Rancho al Medio community members, we receive little feedback regarding the continued use and effectiveness of the filters, the community's satisfaction with the filters, and the community's demand for new filters or other water treatment techniques. Our trip objective was to assess the sustainability of the previously installed filters and the need for future projects related to water quality.

During the week, we tested the water quality of five Biosand filters and one dual-bucket filter for total coliforms and *E. coli*. The one dual bucket system had a high level of *E. coli* after the filter and it was not treating the water well. All of the Biosand filters tested reduced the microbial contamination in the water. However, one of the Biosand filters was not removing the microbial contaminants to U.S. drinking water standards. We found that the main cause for the malfunctioning of the Biosand filter was due to poor maintenance of the filter. We also observed community members using the same container before and after

the filter. This practice will cause contamination of the filter water despite the Biosand filter's removal of microbial contaminants.

We also led two community meetings focused on the water quality test results. The first meeting was a presentation for children about good sanitation and water practices. The second meeting engaged adult community members in a discussion about water quality and we encouraged them to identify problems and seek out solutions. At the meeting, there was interest from a few community members in pooling financial resources to purchase a Biosand filter.

We learned that it is important to implement long term water purification methods, since the community relies so highly on these treatment methods and the potential health risks due to failure are high. Also, the community members need to be reminded and educated on the proper use of the filters in order for them to be maintained properly. The cultural and behavioral decisions play a significant role in the water quality in the community.

From our conversations with community members, we feel that the knowledge of proper water treatment and sanitation has increased since HIA has been visiting and that our visits have made a difference. We saw the community demonstrate a high degree of self-motivation to purchase and install their own technologies. The issue in Rancho is not a matter of financial need or resources, but a matter of priority.

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Beyond Language ~ Alice Liao

I am completely illiterate in Spanish, but I have chosen to return to the community of Rancho al Medio throughout my college years. I believe that there are many ways for people to connect, and speaking the same language doesn't always necessarily mean communication. I have watched brilliant young girls mature into young women who drop out of school as if it's what they're supposed to do once they hit a certain age. I have watched mischievous young boys become responsible young men who are never around the community anymore because it's their turn to work.

This year, when I returned to Rancho al Medio, I was received by an obvious surplus of toddlers; children who were being cared for

by other children, older siblings, or grandparents. Meanwhile the adult population has significantly diminished within the community. From one point of view, it is an indication that more women and men are able to secure jobs, which means that the rural economy is booming. On the other hand, I worry. I may not know the language but, I notice and I worry for those children who are skipping school because they don't have parents around to discipline them during the day, those kids who are sipping beer from their grandfathers' bottles because they are not taught otherwise, and those toddlers who stay out long past their curfew because their parents aren't around to put them to bed.



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**The Joy of Service ~ Kelly Smith**

It's always nice to go somewhere and feel welcome from the moment that you get there. That was the experience I had when I returned to Rancho al Medio with Health in Action for the second year. It was amazing to see the progress that the community has made in the past year. One example of the progress was the correct use of their water filters that we put in place last year. It also never ceases to amaze me that the kids remember us from the previous year and continuously want to learn new words in English. I love the fact that you can just talk to the people in the community, and most of them will just open their doors and invite you into their

houses. Even the adults in the community are eager to learn new things from us, especially about life in the United States. The community has made some improvements over the year since we have been gone, but they also have a long way to go. It is a constant challenge to make our programs as sustainable as possible, but it's immensely satisfying to travel to the Dominican Republic and see that your efforts throughout the year are having an impact. To be able to see this impact is the most fulfilling thing for me because I know that I am making a difference in the life of someone who is less fortunate than I am.

HEALTH IN ACTION

The Rancho Circle of Life ~ Christie Donahue



In anticipation for Rancho al Medio, I prepared myself to see dilapidated houses and free-roaming animals; I saw homes made from scrap aluminum with dogs and pigs running rampant. However, no matter my preparation for material differences between the United States and the Dominican Republic, I was still caught off guard by differences in life aspirations. In the US, it is customary to go to preschool, kindergarten, elementary school, middle school, high school, and college. Then, as if we have not had enough, some go to graduate schools then spend life working a 9-5 job, relocating around the world, then retiring just in time to enjoy

the final years. Before discovering Rancho life, I had never been exposed to anything other than the rapid-fire lifestyle of the US. It amazed me how very few people ever truly leave the community. When they go to the city for work, they almost always return home. I think this is what makes this community so promising. In the United States, we get an education then take it elsewhere. There, children grow up in Rancho, get an education in Rancho, and remain in Rancho where, hopefully, with the right direction, they will be able to apply their knowledge to improve their own community! I have decided a diagram can best convey what I learned in Rancho...

Birth: you may be the first child. If so, your mother is probably between upper-teens and mid-20s. On the other hand, you may be the fourth or fifth child.

Infancy: For the first year or so, you will probably be fairly attached to your mother or other adult woman family member.

Toddler: If you are still the youngest child, mom will probably go back to work in the city (and dad is always at work during the week). This leaves you with your older siblings, grandma, or close relatives and you sometimes wander off alone when no one is watching and you only wear clothes when you have recently had a bath.

About 5: You now go to school in the town center and learn all of the basics of education including reading, writing, science, math, and geography. You also learn about everyday needs such as nutrition. There is one school in your town with 4 classrooms and only two teachers. School rarely starts on time but you go from 8-11 in the morning shift and/or 1-4 in the afternoon. You may also use the excuse that your uniform is dirty or you lost your notebook so you will not go to school. You will attend classes at the elementary school until fifth grade. In general, you love school.

Then: Very few members of your community attend high school because they have to move to a city. A few choose this route and they tend to follow with college in Santo Domingo and will usually leave the country in search of opportunity. However, the majority of people will stick around Rancho and their families for life.

- If you are a girl, you will probably help around the house for a few more years then you start your own family.
- Boys will stick around, hang out with other boys, hold cockfights, and eventually start a family and head to the city on weekdays in search of a job.

**After elementary school.**

Carlospinto middle school: You may continue your education "down the hill" by the beach...about a 2 mile walk (uphill both ways). Here you can attend sixth and seventh grade. You will also learn French and English which were only taught mildly in elementary school.

Although more children are attending middle school at Carlospinto, compared to the 1500 population of the community, the enrollment of Rancho children is still fairly low.

Otherwise: You may stay home to help the family and watch younger siblings.



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"During walks and marathon tutoring sessions at the school Felix learned to write his own sentences, learn pronouns, and conjugate verbs in English."



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English Lessons~Lauren Bailey and Jared Meldrum

I was a part of the English language module for the 2008 spring trip to Rancho al Medio. Looking back on our module's experience during the trip, I believe that English language education is one of the most promising programs for Health In Action in Rancho al Medio. The children's enthusiastic response to our lessons and their amazing ability to learn really surprised us. We gave English lessons five or six times a day, either beneath the large mango tree in the village center or in the school's classrooms. Most every lesson had a good crowd gathered and they were always hungry for more information.

One student, named Felix, learned English faster than I could teach it. He was a 13 year old and attended school at La Playa. During walks and marathon tutoring sessions at

the school Felix learned to write his own sentences, learn pronouns, and conjugate verbs in English. He ended up teaching me as much Spanish as I taught him English, and shows real potential to become a future leader and teacher for the other students in the community. Although Felix was one of the more brilliant students, his level of motivation and potential to learn was evident in all the children in Rancho al Medio.

During our stay with the village, the children obviously didn't become fluent in English, but they did seem more empowered, inspired, and motivated to learn English independently by the end of the week. I really believe that the English Literacy module was a great success in 2008 and I look forward to more literacy programs in the future.

ABOUT HEALTH IN ACTION...

Health in Action is an interdisciplinary group of students from the University of Michigan committed to sustainable health and health literacy both at home and abroad, focusing not only on the development of communities but also on the development of team leadership skills within our organization. We strive to achieve this goal using empowerment through education, research, technological innovation, and of course the dedication and invaluable knowledge provided by the community members with whom we work. Using a multi-faceted approach to health, we strive to take into consideration not only health beliefs and behaviors when designing interventions, but also larger structural factors such as economics, politics, and globalization.

