



# Back to the Dominican: A recap by Bruce McDonald



As retired YMCA people, we are used to seeing our charitable dollars at work. We all have observed the fruits of our investment in action and there is nothing like it. To really appreciate the impact sometimes we have a need to “get our hands dirty,” so to speak.

I was truly privileged and fortunate to spend 40+ years in a YMCA career. I appreciate all that came along with the amazing experiences I have had with the Y. It's a difficult decision to make, but retirement has been an opportunity for both me and the Y for positive change.

It's a wonderful time of life, but also a little scary. There are voids that need to be filled. Spending more time with family, grandchildren, playing a little golf, traveling and generally having a little more leisure time are all quite enjoyable, but as a lifer in the Y, there still is a fire burning inside to do something impactful.

I read about the amazing work the New England YMCA Alumni were doing in the Dominican Republic with their 10-year-old Homebuilding Project and thought maybe this is just the sort of thing I was looking for. I sent in a modest donation and signed up to help.

At the time it seemed a long time away. All of a sudden, the time came and I'm thinking, what did I sign up for? I did not know any of the people going nor much about the logistics of what we were doing or what I needed to prepare for.

I was sent an extensive list of what to bring and what to expect. At the airport, I checked my bag in with a hammer, a 2-pound sledgehammer, a crowbar, paint rollers and a box of industrial garbage bags. I wondered what security might say but got through without a question.

## ***Greeted by Lou and Susan***

When I arrived in Santo Domingo on Saturday afternoon, Project Leader Lou Falk and Susan Albano, another veteran of the project, met me “the rookie”, as they referred to me, at the

airport and brought me to the \$50 a night hotel -- not the Ritz but not too bad either. They both were extremely welcoming and made me feel very comfortable.

Being the first year back in the Dominican Republic after COVID, the number of YMCA Alumni volunteers was down over past years. There were only 6 of us, Lou, Susan, Alan Hurst, Jim Gaites, his stepson Bin and me. We certainly worked hard but the real skilled labor was done by the local contractors that were hired to do the tough work. We also were joined on the first day by a group from the Dominican YMCA's Young Leader Corps. These young folks were all ambitious and fun to work with. A few of them were pre-med students and others were involved with international studies.

The two key leaders in this group are, without a doubt Lou Falk and Andres Fortunato, President of the Dominican Republic YMCA. Two amazing guys.

We set out early Sunday morning to the village of Nizao where the project was happening. Our first stop was the small YMCA on the main street about 300 yards from the house we were to work on. The Y is a small, but impactful building in the heart of the community, once the home of the local school now the headquarters for the YMCA homebuilding project that has produced nearly 20 houses for the locals. The mission is to replace the "shacks" with more livable concrete homes with a concrete floor. The floor is a major improvement for the people who have been living with dirt floors.

## ***It's the people who impressed me***

Despite all the poverty and work we were here to do, the thing that impressed me most was the people. While I didn't speak any Spanish it was not difficult to understand how the people



felt and how they appreciated everything they did have. I didn't see the sad children and sickly-looking people you see in some of these TV ads looking for donations. I saw happy people who took pride in what they had and welcomed us like we were some sort of heroes. I can tell you that even though the group hadn't been there in a couple years, Lou Falk was immediately recognized by the residents who affectionately call him "Papa Lou." He is a local hero there.

The town had one main street with small shops selling a variety of local food and goods. A local church was across from the Y. It was small, but it had a mega sound system that broadcasts the services all up and down main street whether you wanted to hear them or not.

Across from the project was a motorcycle repair shop which was arguably the busiest place in town. There were all kinds of motorcycles/scooters etc. Some are very new and quite impressive, others not so much. But it was fascinating to see the various ways they were tricked up to be used as trucks and various other modes of transportation. It almost seemed as though

it was a status thing for the young riders who would speed up and down the main street. There were speed bumps so they couldn't go too fast.

Another interesting thing that happened several times a day is that a herd of goats would come down the street often stopping at the project and occasionally needing to be directed off the site as they would be searching for fresh greens.

## ***Making way for the new home***

The next morning the six of us YMCA Young Leaders tore down the old shack and had the pieces hauled off site to the Y where they salvaged the materials. This was completed by noon. The afternoon was spent re-painting the outside of three of the homes that were built in previous years. I happened to be painting the side of one of the houses when I walked around to the front and found someone on a small ladder painting the front. While neither of us spoke the same language I soon realized it was one of the people who lived in the houses. He was eager to help and he certainly did. We supplied the paint and off he went. All the houses have a small Y painted on the front and the people are very grateful to the Y.

The next day the local masonry crew came and began the construction of the walls of the new house. Footings had been poured around the shack before we arrived. The six of us split up. Some continued the painting of the previously built homes. And others, including me, were at the site assisting the masons by carrying blocks and wheel barrowing cement. All of the cement was made by hand, no trucks or even mixers. It was transported in an old rusted out wheelbarrow with a solid rubber wobbly front wheel. Then it was shoveled into buckets and carried to the masons.

I spent most of the day with Alan lugging blocks across the street for the masons. Halfway through the day I noticed a young woman joining us carrying two cement blocks at a time right alongside us. I looked at her and she smiled and nodded her head. No English, but I could tell what she was thinking. She was the woman with three children we were building the house for. When the large pile of blocks was finally down to two blocks, we both looked at them and I walked over to pick them up. She stopped me, gave me one and took the other. We brought them across the street to the site. She smiled at me and shook my hand.

That evening the group had dinner together with Andres Fortunato. The food was very good, and the company was even better.

Day three was much of the same, but on the way back to the hotel Alan Hurst had a brilliant suggestion. What if we buy them a new wheelbarrow on the way tomorrow? Genius (not to mention how much easier it would be for us).

So on day four we showed up with a brand new bright yellow wheelbarrow with an inflated front tire. The expression on their faces when we brought the wheelbarrow to the site was the highlight of the trip for me. Best return on a \$150 investment I ever can remember.

## Good progress continued on the house



Day five was a different type of day, but extremely enjoyable. While the masons put on the roof and poured the floor we went on a tour with Andres to visit two of his five YMCA sites in Santo Domingo and then tour the rest of the downtown. I know I said the wheelbarrow was the highlight but I think that was really number two because of the work Andres and his team are doing with the children of Santo Domingo. It would make all of us YMCA Alumni proud to be associated with this amazing organization.

We visited two Downtown Santo Domingo Ys. Both had extensive primary age school classes. The kids were amazing. They all wore white, short sleeve, collared YMCA shirts with blue long pants. The kids were very happy and excited to see us and show

us their lessons. We toured the classrooms and then were encouraged to interact with the children. We went into a classroom and all the kids stood and greeted us and demonstrated a few songs and lessons. Susan started playing this game with the kids teaching them some English as they repeated her words. The kids were extremely engaged and enjoyed her interactions with them.

## Boe Boe Skadeeten

I walked into one of the classrooms myself and the whole class stood up and greeted me. I stood there not knowing anything they said, hesitated, then said HOLA! (That is all I knew and here I am standing there the kids all excited and I had nothing, at least I thought). Then after a long hesitation my old camp director's blood from 40 years ago kicked in. I just blurted out. "Wa dart en Choo" and they all just looked at me. And I repeated it louder and put my hand to my ear and jested for them to repeat which they did. Then I said, "Boe Boe Skadeeten daden wa dart en choo." They repeated that even louder.

Then, "ish skiddily oat en boaten boe boe skiditen darten wad en choo." They repeated with moderate success but were all excited to try. Then the finale... could I remember it? ... and forgive me for the spelling because I don't have a clue what it means: " Hey fiddlley Iddley diddley ish skiddley oat en boat en boe boe skiditen daten wa dart en choo." They all started saying it with little success but wanted more so I started again and repeated it four times They had a blast, but not half as much as I did.

Out in the schoolyard the kids were at recess, and all came over to us. They were fascinated with our phone and apple watches. They loved having their pictures taken. What a great day.

We visited a local beach resort, toured downtown Santo Domingo and had a nice dinner on a rooftop patio looking over the harbor where the tall ships happened to be. Great day.

The local contractors made great progress while we were out for the day. The project was nearly complete. Finishing touches included a few coats of paint and a small Y logo on the front door making this project another great success for all involved, including all of you who generously supported this fabulous project.

I hope all of you will consider "*getting your hands a little dirty*" to "*keep that fire burning*." Thank you all for your great support of this project.

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