

In May of 2023, I got on a plane for the first time in my life and traveled to my parents' motherland— the Dominican Republic. My grandmother had just passed away, and I wanted to support my father who had arrived alone only two days earlier. I wasn't sure what exactly to expect when I got there, but it's safe to say I could hardly keep my jaw off the floor. My father, Fidel Martinez, and his two sisters grew up just minutes (via moped) away from a low-income neighborhood called "Sabana Perdida," where my grandmother took her last breath.

The ride from the airport felt like it would go on forever. A friend-of-a-friend-of-a-neighbor provided my father with taxi-esque services during his time there at a discounted rate, so we couldn't really complain about the black shirts for windows, doors you had to hold closed, spontaneous breakdowns of the propeller-powered engine, or the near-constant brush with death-by-moped. For a week, I wondered how I ever complained about my life back home. Growing up, I always lived ashamed of my just-barely-standing home with messy piles of junk in every corner. My parents were both full-time employees; my brothers worked as soon as they got home from school, and I spent all my time trying to be smarter than I ever really felt so I could afford something better than what my parents were able to give us. Our walls and ceilings were cracked and on their last limb, but they kept us sheltered each year without fail. I could never host sleepovers like my friends, but at least we had a roof over our heads, clean water to drink and bathe with, food on the table, and clothes on our backs.

In Santo Domingo, the country's capital, poverty seemed almost tangible at times; it clung to its people like chewed-up gum under a desk. Every traffic light included at least a dozen Haitian vendors selling overripened fruit, American-branded t-shirts and shoes, touristic souvenirs, and overpriced domestic services. Children and adults alike stood on those streets from dusk until dawn—till their sweat-drenched faces dried up and cooled down.

In Sabana Perdida, poverty took up a more domestic role. On my first night, I took a salt-water bath/rinse my father had strained through for insects and ate mangoes from his neighbor's tree. As I lay in my grandmother's bed and enjoyed the gradually warming-up air the AC unit had brought let out just moments before the nth power outage of the night, I heard a little girl from the adjoining wall cry to her parents for *agua*. She must have been crying herself sick for a while, as I only heard her words through breathy gasps. Until then, I hadn't thought of myself as 'privileged,' but my parents had on more than one occasion. As I wondered if her parents could give her that water, I thought back to every little thing I had back home and took for granted all my life. This little girl was crying for maybe just a cup of any kind of water while my father and I

had used just a handful of USDs to fill up my grandmother's fridge with bottled water, Coke, and aseptic milk.

I left the Dominican Republic in despair; I didn't think enough could be done – not with my hands, at least—to help every man, woman, and child who needed it. At that point, going to dental school as I had initially planned was no longer at the top of my agenda. The more health sciences coursework I completed, the less motivated I felt to succeed in something I no longer felt was making a big enough difference in people's lives. It wasn't until later, when I was studying with Dr. Arelis Moore at Clemson that my motivation came back tenfold. She told us of a CDC-inspired Community Health Assessment and Group Evaluation (CHANGE) plan she and her students implemented in Las Malvinas II, Dominican Republic, pre-COVID. She told us of the steps they took to actively involve the community, value their input, and take advantage of that Latin American *familismo* and friendliness to plan, implement, and measure success in improving conditions in which communities function, work, worship, learn, grow, and ultimately behave. Thanks to professors and researchers like Dr. Moore, who genuinely believe in the efficacy of letting communities voice concerns and continue to take action even after the project/program has 'concluded,' I, too, have come to wholeheartedly trust in these methods so that we may continue to see real change in the world. Social work is at the heart of such change as it lends a hand to those who need it most without judgment or malicious intent to make life a little better or easier to handle.