

Jessie Nance

Santiago, Dominican Republic

I can still hear it. The *bullá* as they call it in the Dominican Republic. Music, voices, television; noise of any sort that fills streets, permeates walls, and sometimes makes you want to invest in earplugs. But most of all, I remember the laughter.

I'm back in the States. I'm walking outside of my job, and I try to find it, any sort of sound or smell that will take me back to Santiago, back to my community. But I struggle. I'm wearing my bracelets given to me by my host brother and sisters. I'm wearing a necklace given to me by my host mom. I'm wearing the confidence and the pride that Dominican women instilled in me. And eventually, I'm there again.

The first week in the Dominican Republic, I did not know how to react to where I was. Amazing people, new situations, new classes, a program incredibly devoted to a responsible interaction between student and community. I found myself on the brink of a daunting challenge. But I also was scared. Unfamiliarity, nervousness, and uncertainty threatened to overtake me. And then I heard the snort. The laugh that I would eventually bring back as a souvenir to all of my family and friends. The laugh of my amazing director was enough to calm any heart, and opened my eyes to the greatest part of my experience abroad; the lesson I found in recognizing that no matter the difficulties in front of us, life is life in any part of the world.

I'm back at my school in the United States and I walk room to room trying to find someone who is there, ready to talk. In the midst of midterms and fellowship applications, I remember what made the Dominican Republic a second home.

I walked house to house in *Hoya del Caimito*, my community in Santiago. I awkwardly knocked on the doors of stranger's houses, with an energetic older woman at my side. She was my *comadre* in my service work. *Doña Esperanza*, "the spinning top of the neighborhood," as her neighbors lovingly called her. She loved to eat, cook, paint, laugh, sing, worry, and talk. She loved all of these things equally though, and had more energy and passion than most people I know. She would take my by her side, we would cook, we would eat, and we would talk. Then we would walk, buy candies, and talk. And she would introduce me to everyone in the street, truly devoted to integrating me into the neighborhood and building a bridge for successful cooperation with my community organization.

I'm at work, listening to my boss kindly ask me to let my co-workers focus on their jobs, instead of telling stories and striking up conversation whenever possible. I'm just missing that feeling. I'm just missing those people. I'm just missing that country.

*Mi familia dominicana*. My Dominican family was the largest, most dysfunctional, most loving group of about 63 people that I met during my four months in the country. They helped me with homework, my Spanish, with understanding *Dominicanismos*, with any problem I had in my life, and they gave me advice. Forget Dr. Phil, I had my help all over the Dominican Republic. What they gave me was an incredible experience, in which my mind was challenged and strengthened due to the nature of our program. But all the people I met lifted me up even when I questioned if I was strong enough to finish my project. I would walk into the house of the family that adopted me in my community, and there were smiles, laughter, food, and new faces every time. Lunchtime was my favorite time to go. Everyone congregated for an hour, sharing food, stories, and jokes. This is where my understanding of Dominican Spanish increased to the maximum. My host siblings would yell, scream, rap, sing, and sometimes just converse while eating, but we always were able to connect during lunch. This family offered me insight into how we build relationships anywhere. I spent every afternoon in this house, stopping by between interviews and meetings, talking to whoever was home, working on my

homework, and just listening. I recorded the voices of my family on my camera so when I came home I could keep this memory with me.

I'm at school, and instant messaging with my host sister. I love seeing what she's writing and imagining her high-pitched shrieks and sarcastic tone. I wish I could hear her, but this technology is good for me. These daily instant messages, no matter how long, were what bound me to my family. And then it happens. My computer starts making some sort of ringing noise, and I see that my host sister is calling me on Skype. I think it's weird because I know they don't have a microphone, so I'm thinking I will probably be awkwardly talking so they can hear me. And then I hear it, in a loud, shrieking scream, "HELLLLLLLO PEOPLE!" This was my host sister's favorite phrase in English. I almost cry. The voice I haven't heard in over a month is now yelling at me through my computer. And then I hear voice after voice, somewhat orderly, and then what I have missed so dearly, the full-on *bull*. And the silence I had been experiencing back home disappears.