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The Dominican Republic is a beautiful country on the inside and out. The island screams with nature in a colorful language that cannot be explained in words. Underneath the surface is a society of people who operate in a collectivist and familial mindset, which results in chivalry, consideration and a sense of safety. Although, with a very adverse history of dictatorships, government corruption and natural disasters, they have struggled to develop their cities, homes and schools and have fallen far behind most countries in all levels of societal development.

The DR's culture is deeply rooted in Catholicism, and this is displayed throughout the education system they have today. The church plays a big role in their youth's development by providing a faith, but also through the funding of multiple private schools throughout the country. Children attending private school obtain a far better experience in terms of knowledge obtained, quality of teachers, quality of meals and extra-curricular activities.

This trend is similar at the collegiate level, but the main issue that the country faces when it comes to education is not the quality, but a need to rise above the poverty line which 40% of Dominicans fall below. For at least 2,000 kids in the city of Santiago, this is their reality and worse. At times, an education is the least of a child's worries as they struggle to obtain food, water or even a home.
In spite of these issues, the Dominican Republic and the United States have many similarities. The one that is most evident is the presence of colorism that occurs almost everywhere in the country. Because the Dominican Republic shares an Island with Haiti, past dictators have demonized Haitians and used fear to control the Dominican people. Although it is not as bad as it used to be, Haitians, and people that appear to be, are discriminated by their skin tone on a day-to-day basis.

My experience in the Dominican Republic was refreshing and a blessing. I had the privilege of seeing my culture and history firsthand. Growing up, the idea of identity was forced on to me. I grew up in a Puerto Rican/Dominican family but did not resemble the typical characteristics of any type of Hispanic, even Dominican. I did not speak Spanish nor did I know how to dance or listen to any of the music. I always knew I was Dominican but had no connection to the culture outside of my grandmother and father. Because of my disconnection, I never felt close to an identity growing up. This trip allowed me to witness firsthand what it means to be Dominican, and because of that I now feel closer to my Spanish heritage more than ever before. Even though Dominicans struggle economically, there was not a moment where a stranger did not greet me with a smile and an inviting presence that made me feel like anything less than a friend. While their quality of living may be significantly worse, their love for each other and their country is their one characteristic that the United States, or any country, could benefit from. If there is one thing I will take away from my trip in the Dominican Republic, it will be their irrevocable, genuine kindness and ability to live happy, fulfilling lives with significantly less amenities.