

John 17:20-21 (NIV)

*“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.*

Good evening, three years ago at the Quadrennial Assembly for Women held in my hometown of Atlanta, I was commissioned as a Global Ministries Intern. It was my deep honor to serve on your behalf from 2014-2016 in Boca Chica, Dominican Republic. Boca Chica is a city situated around a curving lagoon behind a large seawall protected from the waves of the Caribbean Sea. Famous for being the closest beach to the capital Santo Domingo, Boca Chica is made up of colorful homes, dance clubs and zipping motorbikes. The city's beach resorts employ thousands of locals yet they contribute to the community's problems through attracting human and drug trafficking.

In this Caribbean setting, Caminante Proyecto Educativo engages in social ministry on the forefront of a war on poverty and pedophilia. Caminante means *walking on the way*. Sister Denisse Pichardo is the founder and Executive Director. Sister Denise epitomizes the name of the ministry, for she is truly one who walks “the way” in word and deed. Caminate is an established community organization for young people like Yensi. Yensi is a seventeen year old teenager who loves reggaeton music and serving Caminante's Multipliers program. When I arrived, he was at my shoulders and now I look up to him. He is my hero because he has persisted as a Haitian living in a country plagued with xenophobia/fear of foreigners.

Hundreds of young people have come through Caminante's doors to receive a hot meal, a set of clothes and a safe place to recover after a harrowing time spent living on the street or on the beach, where predators and pedophiles prey. Caminante and the Global Ministries Intern serve together to host Christmas parties, play baseball, make jewelry out of coconut shells, lead educational trips to Santo Domingo, celebrate birthdays, take an interest in the lives of the children, and offer Vacation Bible Schools, tutoring, and day camps. Our shared ministry was holy and one could feel God's presence working through the community. It was my joy to be a part of Caminante and the lives of hundreds of young people like Yensi for two years. Thank you, Church. Thanks to your active support, we have made a difference; we also have a ways to go. We have much to hear, much to share, and much to learn.

I learned so much from Yensi and his compañeros. The kids taught me to breathe, to take a moment and appreciate what relationships and resources God provides. I learned all this and more as I adjusted and my Spanish fluency increased. In return, I represented our church by showing the love of God to all the youth we rescued along the beaches and back streets and all that came through Caminante's doors. Like my colleagues in Caminante, I came to know each kid's back story, personality, habits and musical tastes. I welcomed them into Caminante's side annex daily, served them free lunch, and did small English lessons or Spanish lessons. Together we welcomed the American Disciples who arrived for missional experiences. Together we shared our stories and broke bread.

Life in the Caribbean is peaceful for the adults and children not living on the street. The power goes out and the water stops working. The bus is “late” or the meeting starts an hour later than it was supposed to, but we adjust. We stock up on bathing water in the bathroom, purchase

fresh water for drinking, and keep smiling. We just keep moving because tomorrow the sun will rise and it will still be 88 degrees and the kids will still need our help. Life goes on there at whatever pace you take it.

I have tried new foods, gone cliff diving, swum in crystal clear lagoons, and walked Boca Chica's beach at night looking at thousands of stars I never imagined existed. (I grew up in Atlanta haha!) I have come to meet or know Dominicans and Haitians from every level of society and have been welcomed unconditionally into their homes and sacred places. On my route to collect food for the boys' lunch, I greeted my afternoon girls' class as they returned home from school. They shouted my name and exuded joy. I think they do that for everyone though ☺.

Through it all, I learned that it's not about me. It's about learning from and listening to our neighbors. While I gained skills through living in a foreign country and spending time with Dominicans, the real purpose of my presence there was twofold: First, I was there because the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the United Church of Christ believe in Caminante and therefore desire a continued relationship there in Boca Chica; Second, I was there to accompany Caminante and Señora Denisse in sharing the love of God and offering hope to all we encounter in our mission. I was present on your behalf. I was a messenger bringing your love to Caminante, and now I'm bringing their love back to you. Please keep them in your hearts and minds. We are one in Christ with our brothers and sisters in Boca Chica. Somos uno en cristo con nuestros hermanos y hermanas en Boca Chica. Thanks be to God, Amen