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Looking Back and Moving Forward: The story of African American descendants living in the Dominican Republic

By Stephanie Claytor

When I went to the Dominican Republic to study abroad in the spring of 2008, I envisioned completing my Capstone Project by creating a documentary that discussed issues related to identity and beauty amongst Dominican women. After visiting Samana, Dominican Republic, I started to have a change of heart when a woman named Martha Willmore told my group the story of African Americans who moved there in 1824. From this moment on, I was intrigued; I always knew there was a deeper connection between African Americans and Dominicans, but I had not figured it out until then. I never forgot this story and told people that I came across when I returned home, including a former videographer for ABC News, while working during the spring semester of my junior year. We were working the night of President Obama's Joint Address to Congress. In between shots, I told him what I learned about Samana. He said I needed to go back, interview people and do a story on it. His inspiration was all I needed and our conversation proved to be a critical turning point in my Honors Capstone Project journey; from that day forward, I set forth saving money, buying a plane ticket, setting up interviews and arranging places to stay so that I could complete my Capstone.

On May 16th, 2009, I arrived in Santiago, Dominican Republic and headed to Samana to start my project. I sought to tell the world about this piece of forgotten African American, American, and Dominican history; a story that is not written in either American or Dominican history books but instead buried in Samana bookstores, and historical societies in Philadelphia. I set out to change this. The purpose of my film is to educate African Americans, Dominicans, Haitians, Americans, and Latinos on the immigration of blacks to the Dominican Republic, so that these groups understand our intertwined histories and comprehend that we have more similarities than we can imagine.

By the end of the summer of 2009, I looked over and logged all of my interviews, selecting which parts I would use in my film. Then I began to plan and save up for my Philadelphia trip which I completed senior year over winter break. I had to take a break from my project half of this semester because I started working as a temporary weekend reporter in Binghamton. Fortunately, my job ended just in time for me to work on project so that I could finish it in time.

When approaching this topic, I knew I wanted to let the people tell the story. I chose not to use my voice as narration because I felt it was important to hear the people living there as much as possible. I wanted the viewer to hear the Old English in Martha Willmore's voice and see the people's ability to switch back and forth from English to Spanish with ease. By listening to some of the voices in the film, the viewer can tell some of

the cultural traditions brought over by the African Americans is dying in Samana, just by the fact that their English is rusty. These are all of the reasons I used Martha Willmore's interview as a narration for my work. Some of the other things I considered include: making sure different generations of African American descendants have a voice. This was important because each generation has a different struggle and viewpoint. The younger generation considers themselves more Dominican than anything and from what I observed, does not really adhere to the African American traditions brought over by their ancestors. The middle generation remembers what it was like to navigate both the Dominican and American worlds, growing up in the mid 20th century. They appear to be upset that the younger generations do not follow the same traditions that they had to follow when they were younger. From my interviews with the older generation, it seems that they are completely disgusted with the way the young people in the town are behaving. They are upset with all of the changes to the community. I felt it was important to showcase all of these viewpoints. I believe all of these interviews added value to my work and made it complete.

During my stay, I refused to stay in the resort. Instead, I chose to stay down below in the bay at the motel across from the church, so that I could interact with people, even when I was not working. By staying near the people in town, I was able to have informal conversations, find out more information and more people I could interview. I invited my host

sister to help me shoot Ms. Willmore's interview because she studied film in college.

It was somewhat difficult arranging the interviews in Samana. I had to get in touch with the guide, Santiago, in order to schedule an interview with Ms. Willmore. In order to get in contact with Santiago, I had to contact my Professor from the Dominican Republic, whom I had not talked to in over a year. I sent her an email in February but it was until late April that she responded with Santiago's contact information. Once I received his information, I was able to set up an interview with Ms. Willmore, book my hotel, and flight, and let my host mother know that I was coming. I got lucky with Hidalgo's and Shepard's interviews. Shepard approached me at the hotel and was eager to tell me her story. I met Hidalgo when I was leaving town headed for the capital. He told me he was a descendant and I asked if I could interview him on the bus and he agreed to do it. Santiago was very helpful because he escorted me around the town and helped me facilitate getting some of the video I needed such as Barrio Willmore, his family's neighborhood, the church, the schools and the rural areas.

After conducting the interviews in Samana, I felt it was pertinent to go back to Philadelphia, where the descendants left from, to tell that side of the story. Through these interviews and research, I learned that the main reason why the freed blacks immigrated to Samana in Hayti (now Dominican Republic) was largely due to escaping the fugitive slave law and initiatives to send free blacks back to Africa, something many

opposed. I chose to weave this information into the documentary, but I did not want it to take over because I wanted the story to focus on the Dominican Republic.

While working on this project, I utilized various theories that I had in mind. I wanted to let the story flow without my interruption. I sought after the emotional sound bites; I tried to get people to have an honest conversation with me about how they felt about their culture and traditions disappearing. I wanted to know what they thought about the influx of tourism that is taking over their community and how they plan to profit off of it. What did the elders think about the fact that their grandchildren could not speak English, their first language? These were all questions I wanted answered. In terms of structure, I wanted the story to be a mixture of a documentary and a long-form news report which mixed the English and Spanish language and culture simultaneously. I chose this structure because I felt the interviewees' narration reflects a documentary but the structure, flow, and the parts where I appear on camera reflect a long form news report. I chose to include the stand-ups because I felt they were perfect transitions.

As one can see, working on this project forced me to make many tough decisions, overcome many obstacles, and make many sacrifices. The first obstacle was funding. I used all of my savings to pay for the trip and materials; in total I spent well over \$600 just on Dominican Republic trip alone. I also had to fund two trips to Philadelphia. Another obstacle

included making sure that I, along with my camera, made it back to the United States safely. While in Samana, I had to be cognizant that I was a young woman, semi-tourist, at times alone, with a camera worth thousands of pesos in my possession. Because of this, sometimes I chose to shoot some of my shots quickly off the tripod. Perhaps this is the reason why some of my shots are a little shaky. If the bulk of my story did not reside in the Dominican Republic, I would've gone back to redo some of these shots. Another issue was audio. I planned to use a wireless mic for my stand-ups and interviews but upon arrival to Samana, I realized I did not have a battery charger, and I was unable to purchase batteries in the town. There was not a nearby Walmart or supermarket or anything like that. So I had to make due without and improvise. Also, I could not carry a whole lighting kit on the plane. It was bad enough that I had to lug around my carryon luggage, a camera, tripod, laptop and extra supplies on the plane by myself. Then, my trip to Philadelphia came with obstacles as well. The first time, there was a snow storm that shut down the city Sunday morning, the day I needed to get video of the church service. I traveled back to Ohio, debating if I wanted to go back. I decided it was necessary to fulfill the Philadelphia component. So, on my way back from winter break, I drove to Philadelphia, attended services and then came to Syracuse. Another issue included deciding which equipment to use for editing, I chose to use Avid because I am slightly more familiar with the system. Looking back, I may have been able to get more creative with

Final Cut, since Avid is very structured and makes it more difficult to use creativity.

When it came time to organize my material, I decided to go with the theme of looking back in the past and then moving forward with today's issues. In the beginning, Ms. Willmore talks about the people who came over and why they were invited. Then, I take it back to Philly so the viewer understands the threats freed blacks faced in that era, and why they wanted to leave. Then, we head back to the Dominican Republic or what was then Hayti, to learn about how the church glued the community together, which helped them survive and prosper. In the end, we learn how the community has changed, and now may become the next hottest tourist destination, similar to Punta Cana.

Coming into this project, I knew from other people across the island that tourism is a big issue that changes communities. Everything becomes more expensive, natives carelessly sell their land, and then are forced to work long, hard, hours in the hotels. I have witnessed the prostitution of young girls who look just like me. I have talked to people about businessmen coming and trying to take their land. I have met and had conversations with architects who are building in the tourist areas. From an African American perspective, I grew up in a black Methodist congregation, where "I want Jesus to Walk with me" is a familiar, powerful, refrain. I grew up learning about the fugitive slave law. This was all prior knowledge that I brought to the table, when embarking on this project.

Knowing this information, I wanted to ask the people in this town how they felt about the growing tourism in the area and what they were doing about it. I thought this was a fitting way to close the piece and I ended with Ms. Shepard's comments, that she is reclaiming her land, in essence fighting tourism and also asking for something to be done so that she can travel to the United States and meet her family that may stayed behind.

After examining the prior knowledge I had walking into this project, one gets a glimpse into my approach. Because I had already visited the town, I knew the area, I knew who to talk to, where the tourists relax, where locals sell goods, where the barrio was, etc. My approach was to tape everything, and interview everyone I encountered that would add to the story. As far as editing goes, I love to use music to break up different conversations. Since the video I obtained was full of music, I tried to use it whenever I got a chance. Also, I believe prayer is very powerful, so I strived to use that as well. I wanted the story to have a natural flow. All of the music in the documentary was music that was captured on tape while there. The beginning and ending is music blasted in the street, along the "malecon" or walkway in front of the bay. There are a few ways I could've done this project differently. I could have used my own narration. This may have provided some outside interesting facts but, I felt it was more important to hear the community tell its own story. I could have included more of Philadelphia, where various changes have taken place as well in the Society Hill neighborhood where Mother Bethel AME church is located

but, I chose not to because the uniqueness of the story lies in the Dominican Republic, and I wanted that to be the focus. Also, I could have interviewed a historian from the outside to narrate the story, but I believed it was a better idea to use Ms. Willmore as the narrator because again, I did not want an outsider to tell the story. I think it's best to go straight to the source.

There are a various people who have studied or are studying this story, mostly through writing academic articles. Max Beecher, a photographer, created the photo exhibit "Americans in Samana" back in 2002. Louie Massiah, an acclaimed documentarian, is creating a documentary on Samana right now. He came to Syracuse this semester and showed us the beginning of his documentary. He had similar images but he interviewed historians and an elderly man whom had the assistance of a white woman while speaking. I found this kind of strange since the only white people I saw in the town were tourists. I am not sure where he found these historians nor their area of expertise. Also, I have never seen the elderly man he interviewed and I met various people in the town. In addition, his documentary takes a different approach in that he focuses more on the revolution of Haiti, the migration of blacks there and the migrations of blacks from Haiti to the United States and forming "Hayti" communities across the country. After speaking to him after his presentation, I understood why he took his approach. He told me he has yet to visit Samana, and does not speak Spanish. So that explains why he

chose the historians from wherever to tell the story and why he does not have the same interviews. My problem with that is for many years, others- mainly Caucasians- have taken the opportunity to tell the story of minority groups from their perspective and sometimes, the stories get misconstrued. I felt it was important to document what the people had to say about themselves, not someone on the outside looking in.

Other influences include my experience working with Newshouse, where I learned how to do stories without reporter narration. I enjoyed this challenging experience of finding ways to put together your interviewees statements in manner in which they tell their stories by themselves. I expanded on this experience to create my documentary. Also, I admire the work of one of the military grad students here-Patrick House. He does great work and I have seen a couple of his pieces and I wanted to do the same caliber of work. I learned some of the special effects from Calvin, an editor at my old internship at FOX 8 WJW. I used to sit with him and watch him edit, while taking notes. Some of the skills I learned there I incorporated in my documentary. I got the idea for my introduction from watching Louie Massiah's introduction. I noticed he had quick shots matched with dissolves. So I strived to create an opening, similar to his. In addition, I enjoy watching Soledad O'Brien's "Black in America" segments and some of the storytelling techniques employed in those segments probably rubbed off in my work.

In order to complete this project, I had to utilize the knowledge I have learned from all three of my majors- which is why I am so passionate about this documentary. From a journalism perspective, I had to know how to ask good, in depth questions. (In English and Spanish) I had to dig deeper to get my interviewees to talk ; for example, when Ms. Willmore mentioned corruption coming to the area. I asked “What is corruption?” and she explained what she meant- gambling, and drinking. Except for the parts where I appeared on camera and Ms. Willmore’s interview, I did all of the work. I learned from my education at Newhouse how to shoot video, how to avoid bad lighting, how to mic a person, how to get a variety of shots, how to shoot wide, medium, and tight shots. I employed all of these things I learned over the years. When it came time to write my script, I had more than 10 tapes of footage to choose from. I listened to them all and picked out the sound bites that had the most emotion. This is something I learned in my television reporting class. When it came to editing, I had experience with Avid since I was in high school. Over the years, I have improved through interning at FOX 8 WJW, working on television shows on campus, and using Avid in the classroom. In the realm of International Relations and Spanish, my study abroad experience to the Dominican Republic afforded me the ability to speak Spanish, know how to remain safe, and have an understanding of how tourism operates so that I could put this documentary together and really capture the essence of the community, its past, its struggles, and its future.

I believe my work has emerged beyond previous works because no one really focuses in depth on this community and its struggles right now. Most works just focus on the past and how the people came there but no one takes it one step further to say “What is going on in the community now?” In the works that I have read regarding this topic, none of them talk about this being a future tourism mega spot or the fact that the people are losing or selling their land, or the fact that 50 years from now, people may even forget the immigration ever happened. Out of the 6,000 blacks that immigrated to Hayti, this is the last bastion where the culture is still holding on.

This project was a huge accomplishment and learning experience. There were many days when I wanted to give up but I am glad I was able to finish. If I had more time, there are a few things I would do over but I am happy about the current end result. Through working on this documentary, I realize I want to explore long-form reporting and documentaries more and take some classes in the future because I have found I have a passion for it and I’ve thought about creating my own production company in the future. This was my first official project and I loved working on it. Every time I looked at the video, I was entranced because I love the Dominican Republic and watching the video made me feel like I was back there. Being African American, this is a part of my history that I did not know. It’s like one of the many forgotten stories that exist in my culture. Working on this documentary made me feel like I was

reclaiming my history; and who knows, my mother's maiden name is Mitchell, so there's a far cry that some of these families could be my relatives. But more than that, this is a part of American history that we as Americans should be aware of. Many of the people living there are not living in lavish American conditions; they are living in poverty. It makes one wonder where they would be if they stayed in the United States. It makes me upset just as it makes Ms. Shepard upset to think that if the freed blacks were not threatened and challenged to leave the United States, their descendants would be living in better lifestyles today with guaranteed electricity, hot water, and other amenities that we take for granted. To be given the opportunity to document this historical community is overwhelming. It was a worthwhile quest to find information that they did not have access to such as the actual invitation that invited the freed slaves to Hayti. I found this document at the Philadelphia Historical society and included it in the film. I enjoyed every minute that I spent working on this project because I knew this was a powerful story that needed to be told.

To those who watch my documentary, depending on their background, it will shed different lights. Latinos, especially Dominicans, will realize that they have more connections with the African American community than they imagined. In my experience, some would rather expand on their differences with the black community rather than working together. For them, this film might be a shocker and for those who have

never visited the island, they will probably feel grateful that someone took the initiative to raise them in the States. Haitians will probably be proud that their former President offered freed slaves a safe haven. African Americans will probably be shocked at the fact that they may have relatives in the Dominican Republic and just astounded that there are people that follow the same traditions as they do in the Dominican Republic. For other viewers, the film will enlighten them on American history, especially the American Colonization Society, which actually believed that it could remove freed slaves from the country before the 1900s. This documentary will demonstrate how far we have come as a nation, considering right now we have an African American president. Hopefully, whoever watches my film will walk away having learned some history, enlightened, and also willing to help fight to get the descendants living there visas so at the very least, they can be allowed to visit the United States. I have even considered showing this film to Congressional members who represent Philadelphia to see if a bill can be drafted to grant these rights. Therefore, they can reunite with family members who may have stayed behind in the United States and visit Mother Bethel in Philadelphia, the church which helped the families leave the country.

In conclusion, this project is proof that without hard work, there is no progress. I am pleased that I came up with an original idea for my Capstone and that I completed it. I challenged myself in terms of time management, arranging interviews, interviewing people, getting video, and

editing. This project is the epitome of "Scholarship in Action," where I took everything I learned in classroom and applied it in the real world.

Although there are a few things would I change and there were many obstacles I had to overcome, I can say I am pleased with my project and honored that I even had the opportunity to complete it.