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UMD law students travel to Haiti on fact-finding trip

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Editor's note: During spring break Professor Irene Scharf, director of the Immigration Law Clinic at the UMass School of Law in Dartmouth accompanied a group of UMass law students to the Dominican Republic to engage in fact-finding about the conditions of Haitians in the country. This piece was written by Scharf and Justin Steele, executive articles editor of the UMass Law Review.

The mission of UMass School of Law, the only public law school in Massachusetts, is to create "justice centered lawyers." It was therefore no surprise that many students jumped at the chance to witness the treatment of Haitian immigrants in the Dominican Republic during the 2013 Spring Break. The trip meant relinquishing a week of relaxation, something precious to law students, and traveling to a poor country where most of us had never been. But guiding us the whole way were the Director of the UMass Immigration Law Clinic, "Doña" Irene Scharf; and Fred Rooney, a Fulbright Scholar and now director of the International Justice Center for Post-Graduate Development at Touro Law Center in New York.

The trip began with a flight that arrived at the Santo Domingo airport at 3 a.m., followed by an 8-hour van ride to the seaside town of Pedernales. We spent a few days there learning about the problems plaguing Haitians in the Dominican Republic. One of the most striking events was visiting a prison filled with Haitian immigrants. It was cramped, dark, and hot. There was no running water, no functioning bathroom facilities, no right to food or water, and no right to communicate with the outside world.

In the hills surrounding Pedernales, accompanied by two community organizers from the NGO Red Fronteriza Jano Siksé, we learned about how the various surrounding neighborhoods had helped to organize the local populations. They help members of the local community learn about abuses suffered by Haitian residents and workers (called daily "drop-ins"), and advocate for improvements (through a "bottom-up" structure).

At the border, Haitians cross through narrow gates guarded by armed soldiers and police, seeking employment, education, and opportunities for their children. The guards intimidate and harass; we heard numerous accounts of military and police brutality. Even so, upon crossing over to the Haitian side for a short visit, we saw such abject poverty that it made Pedernales look like paradise.

The Jesuit-sponsored organization Centro Bono, based in Santo Domingo but with offices throughout the country, particularly in border towns, is trying to get proper immigration papers and work visas for Haitians in the country. This work is difficult because of laws passed in 2004 and 2010 that removed citizenship rights from many Haitians and Haitian children born "in transit."

In Jimani, another border town, we met a Haitian pastor who works with Haitian women who left Haiti because of domestic abuse. He is teaching the women to make soap and cleaning agents as a way to earn money — skills he hopes they will use upon returning home. The mantra was simple: "Haitians do not need fish; we need to learn to fish."

This is a vastly abbreviated description of the incredible circumstances and people we encountered during Spring Break. The experience touched all of us profoundly. One of the goals of the trip was to produce tangible results; to this end, we have submitted a report of our findings to Professor Rooney that we hope will be used to raise funds for this necessary work. The student co-author of this article is also continuing his study of the situation by writing an academic article comparing the condition of Haitians in the Dominican Republic with Mexicans in the United States.

The Dominicans we met, all of whom have such profound love for their country, and for the Haitians now sharing it with them, will undoubtedly have an enormous impact on the future well-being of the Haitians in the D-R and on the outcome of this delicate situation. Based on our experiences, these people, working so hard to improve the situation, will take the Dominican Republic into a new era that manifests respect for human rights and dignity for all.

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