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100 Projects for Peace, Project Proposal: A Well in Batey Libertad

Batey Libertad is located about an hour from the Haitian border, in the north-west Cibao Valley of the Dominican Republic. Initially a series of barracks built by the Dominican government to house sugar cane workers, Batey Libertad is now home to approximately 1,000 permanent residents, and 1,000 temporal residents who come to live in the area during the rice planting season. The community includes Haitian immigrants, Dominicans of Haitian descent and Dominicans.

Batey Libertad has experienced a number of police raids. Officers enter the town very early in the morning, banging on doors and shouting. They leave with truckloads of people to be deported. During a raid on May 13<sup>th</sup>, 2005, a woman was clubbed in the forehead with the butt of a pistol, a two-week old infant was placed in the arms of a neighbor while her mother was taken, and the Dominican identification card of a university student was ripped in half while its owner protested his Dominican citizenship to an officer.

These events offer an illustration of life in Batey Libertad. While Haitian immigrants and their descendents face discrimination and prejudice throughout the Dominican Republic, these problems are particularly acute in poor communities such as Batey Libertad. In addition to the threat of deportation and police brutality, residents must also confront the constant challenges and injustices of a life in poverty. Many residents live in shacks of corrugated tin sheets. Electricity is unreliable, often lasting for only a couple hours a day. Potable water is rarely available. Medical treatment is either unavailable, or severely hindered by prejudice and economic restraints.

In spite of these challenges, the people of Batey Libertad are, and have been, devoted to the development of their community. Working both independently and coordinating with NGOs, the residents excel at community organizing. The population can be characterized by initiative and determination. Having just returned from my fifth trip to Batey Libertad, I was moved by the continued determination and work of the community, but also concerned by the number and severity of the setbacks it has faced.

One of, if not the most, significant problem faced by Batey Libertad is the lack of potable water. Nearly all of the residents suffer from constant urinary tract infections, resulting from prolonged dehydration. Agricultural workers, plagued by their exposure to fertilizers, pesticides and other chemicals, compound their medical problems by bathing in a polluted river. Relatively minor medical conditions become severe when clean water is not available.

Building a well in the community could almost guarantee dramatic change for Batey Libertad. There is a specific plot of land, located on the edge of the town, which is expected to have a secure water table. This site would be ideal for a point well. The purchase of this land, the evaluation of the aquifer and water supply, and the installation of a well would constitute a perfect Project for Peace.

The development of any community must be founded upon the health of its population. Accordingly, a primary inhibitor to the development and advancement of Batey Libertad is the lack of water. The installation of a well, therefore, would do much to improve the health of its residents. Making potable water readily accessible to the community will serve as a base upon which to build the health and overall well being of the population. This foundation will do much to advance the development work already in place, and also encourage the growth of new projects.

Over the past 15 years Batey Libertad has experienced a number of positive changes. A number of families now live in cement block houses, as opposed to corrugated tin shacks. The first generation to receive a higher education, comprised of a handful of university students, is currently studying law, medicine and tourism. The majority of the community's children attend both primary and secondary school. The promise of this success, however, is tempered by other developments. A woman in her early thirties recently died from tuberculosis, a number of people in the community have been infected with the HIV virus and the threat of deportation remains a serious concern.

To continue the extraordinary advances made by the people of Batey Libertad, they must be able to address their health concerns. Without water, any efforts will be in vain. Batey Libertad is a community of great potential, having already made so much progress. Its population has the opportunity to continue and improve its work and influence, serving as an impetus for change in the lives of many Haitians and Dominicans of Haitian descent. The building of a well holds great promise, not just within the community of Batey Libertad, but throughout both countries, as the individuals of Batey Libertad persist in their work to better their own and others' situation.

Having visited and lived in the community of Batey Libertad a number of times, I feel secure in my ability to organize this project. I am well acquainted with a number of community individuals, families and groups, in addition to several foreigners invested in the community. Dr. Patricia Erikson, of the University of Vermont, in particular has agreed to work with me. Dr. Erikson is especially dedicated to this project for she has run several health clinics in the batey and has experienced first hand the difficulties of practicing medicine without water. We have both overseen construction projects and other development ventures in Batey Libertad.

The construction of a well will have positive repercussions for an innumerable amount of people. The project will speak to the fact that peace is not to be defined solely as the absence of physical violence, but as a sense of harmony over one's entire being. True peace should include a right to a healthy life and opportunity, regardless of one's ethnicity, skin color or nationality. As the people of Batey Libertad work to improve their community, they continue fighting for their right to a peaceful existence, and the recognition of their rights as residents, citizens, workers, students, laborers, individuals and organizations.