Elementary Marvels

An anthropologist travels to a Dominican Republic barrio to visit Café con Leche, a remarkable children’s school, and its founder Marisol Jimenez.

BY MARIA VILLAR

AMES, OF COURSE, THOUGH WE RARELY think about them, are full of meaning. But when I first heard of Café con Leche, an elementary school on the outskirts of the Dominican Republic’s capital, I thought, “Coffee with milk?”

On sabbatical leave from my university, I decided to find out more.

Café con Leche was started in 1991 by a young woman, Marisol Jimenez, whose life is guided by the Focolare’s spirituality of unity. As she visited a local parish one day, she noticed that many children were not in school. Assisted by the local priest, she decided to organize a summer camp. After two summers of volunteering for nearly 700 children, Marisol understood her mission: to teach on a regular basis and establish a permanent school.

The school is located in the El Café barrio, an impoverished community in need about 8 miles southwest of Santo Domingo. The terrain is hilly and difficult for transportation. There is no running water nor drainage systems in most areas; only 30 percent of the houses have indoor plumbing. No electricity reaches private houses; many tap public lines and endure daily outages. Trash is only collected at accessible points and is otherwise burned or left to contaminate the riverbank.

Housed in a small warehouse at first, the modest school steadily grew. The Department of Education appointed Jimenez and a friend who had also been volunteering to be teachers of a three-grade school. In 2000, with the assistance of the Focolare community, the Foco Foundation was created to provide support, although it was truly divine providence, to sustain the school at every turn.

The next year, without much capital, ground was broken for building an actual school. An engineer provided free labor to lay the foundations, and students and parents helped carry the first blocks. Today the 7-classroom two-story building includes a fenced patio with a well and a recently built dining and cooking facilities that open out onto a paved courtyard.

When I reached Santo Domingo, my hosts advised me against public transport, since the school is in an unsafe, remote area. En route I observed many luxurious buildings and a fancy country club, but all this changed as we reached the barrio and moved along unpaved alleys lined with unpainted, concrete or wood houses with zinc roofs.

Then, at the end of a street, stood the colorful little school, a huge rainbow painted by the entrance and a patio full of children.
By the fall of 2006, Café con Leche was “bursting at the seams.” Close to 500 students, grades one to six, were enrolled into two half-day sessions. There were just seven teachers; two of them taught both morning and afternoon sessions. A typical class had more than 50 students. A smaller class for children with learning disabilities was held in the dining hall, still under construction.

Parents regularly come to the school begging to enroll their children, in order to avoid having to leave them locked in at home while they are at work.

Jimenez, now the principal, is a bundle of energy and the heart of the school. Among her many duties, she even distributes food in the dining hall.

“I am just a tool,” she explains. “All that you see here has been done by God. All is his providence.”

In her gratitude, though, there is also a clear-eyed vision of their difficult situation. The Dominican government pays the salaries of the school staff, provides a meager breakfast for students and supplies books whenever available. Teaching jobs are poorly paid and teacher training receives low priority.

While I was visiting Café con Leche, news arrived that first- and second-grade books had reached a nearby center. Marisol and I rushed there by scooter to secure some books, but with no inventory list for a storage room full of dust and scattered boxes, they could not be found.

In a community afflicted with poverty and delinquency, the school has become a source of employment and training. Mothers who help cook lunch and clean the premises earn a minimum wage. Alumni coordinate summer camps, lead physical education sessions and acquire skills. Neighborhood women attend adult literacy classes and experience economic progress.

A woman who lives next to the school sells candy during recess and watches the property when it is closed. A piggy bank used to collect students’ contributions in the main office assists staff and helps pay for unexpected expenses.

Café con Leche provides other vital community services. Each day nearly 100 students are served privately funded lunches. At lunchtime the school porter keeps watch as bands of children run by the patio down the stairs leading to the dining hall. Some students lead smaller siblings, still too young to attend the school, to sit together and share their lunch. Others bring tiny containers to save portions of their food for younger brothers and sisters at home. Absolutely no food is lost at Café con Leche.

Although it is a public school, donors and volunteers sponsor most activities and operating costs. A British nonprofit organization (i-to-i) has been sending young people to teach English as part of a pre-college learning experience. Youth from Spain have come to assist with the summer camps and community health plans. Contributions from the Focolare Movement and the Adoption at a Distance program (see Living City, Dec. 08) play a crucial role.

While the school’s needs are persistent and increasing, there remains an overt culture of giving. During recess, neighbors drop by to collect water from the well built on the patio; a hose is permanently attached so they can share this precious resource.
When gifts arrive from donors abroad, some give their presents to those whom they perceive need them more. Something much deeper than the mere distribution of material goods is happening at the school.

The spirit of service is nurtured through example and daily routines. Before classes begin each morning the Cube of Love (see p.2) is rolled to choose the day’s guiding principle. A different teacher throws it each time and explains the phrase. At times the students share their experiences of how they put it into practice the day before. It is impressive to see so many parents remaining for this moment.

The day before I left Café con Leche, a young boy saw my voice recorder and offered to sing a song. A chorus of his classmates chimed in for the school’s theme song:

We are the school Café con Leche,
We are a mix of black and white …
We are always faithful to God
and carry Mary in our heart.

As I listened, I realized that the name mystery was solved. Café con Leche, a new race embodies the unity of humankind, with God in their mind and Mary in their soul.

Their generosity, their joy and self-confidence made it clear: Café con Leche is a truly unique school.

In one of the Most Important Malls of Santo Domingo, alumni of Café con Leche school were given the opportunity to set up a booth. There they could sell their colorful, handmade puzzles and toys of all shapes and sizes, each of which is designed as an educational aid.

This is normally a very expensive venture, but their only fee would be 25% of each product they sell. The opportunity seemed enormous to them, not only for the exposure but also for the experience of entering into the real world of business.

The young people built their own stand in the shape of a house with a big sign with the name of their project, “Jovenes Creativos / Foco Foundation.” They learned how to put barcodes on the items, packaging techniques and new marketing strategies to attract buyers.

They wore special uniforms with their own logo, were faithful to the daily business hours of 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. and developed good working relationships with their fellow employees and customers. Perhaps their most profound discovery was the joy and freedom of working together for others.

Now they are becoming resources for other students who also want to learn how to become entrepreneurs. Jovenes Creativos, or “creative youth,” has become an example for their whole community of how hard work and a developed sense of responsibility reaps more benefits than the criminal activities they are often exposed to.

Jovenes Creativos’ educational toys are for sale at Ave Center, Hyde Park, NY (avecenter@focolare.us)

Anyone wishing to contribute can send a check made payable to New Humanity, Inc., a nonprofit entity, to: New Humanity/Café con Leche, P.O.Box 11791, New Brunswick, NJ 08906. All donations are tax deductible. To inquire about other ways to help, contact Margarita Cano, Foco Foundation: marocano@hotmail.com

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