

Interview with Blas Jiménez

by Sheridan Wigginton

Sheridan Wigginton conducted the following interview with Blas Jiménez on April 10, 2000 at his home in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. This conversation offered insight into the first of three recently developed and innovative study abroad programs for both students and teachers. The program detailed in this interview is scheduled to begin during summer 2000. Each of the three programs, alternately based in the Dominican Republic, Peru and Nicaragua, is designed to teach Spanish language, culture and literature through a core curriculum based upon the experiences of the Afro-Hispanic population of the host country. The program detailed in this interview is the first program scheduled to begin in the summer of 2000.

Sheridan Wigginton: Could you talk a little bit about what the three programs are, toward whom they are targeted and the general content?

Blas Jiménez: We're targeting the first program toward general faculty. When we say general faculty, we mean high school teachers and university and college professors. It will be a general course in which we are going to spend ten days starting with an introduction to the history of Afro-Latin America. We're going to be talking about the history of Latin America from the African perspective in Latin America. Also we will have an emphasis on Afro-Hispanic literature starting with the Moorish presence in Spain and ending with Afro-Latin American writers today, like Nancy Morejón; just an overview. The main part of the program is the present situation of the Afro-Latin American and trying to fill the gap

between the history, the literature and community building in the Afro-Latin American system today. The major emphasis will be the analysis of the Organization of Africans in the Americas paper on the present situation of the Afro-Latin. That paper is going to be published in two weeks in Washington. At the end we would like that to be integrated into the curriculum in the United States because a lot of people don't know how the system of the Afro-Latin is in most of the country. We don't even know that there are Afro-Latin countries. Part of our focus is that some of that information would be integrated into the classroom setting in the U.S. and that would have an impact in the future.

SW: Do you have any expectations about how the faculty that come to the program should implement some of that information? Do you have any specific ideas that you want them to take back?

BJ: If they just come and see the information that would be good enough because it's going to be an eye-opener. When they come, they're going to say "Oh, I didn't know this. What's going on?" From then on, it'll be more of an individual thing. Now, I can see from the information that we're going to present, a lot of different ways or approaches that can be used for teaching any subject in the classroom from social sciences to literature. What we're saying is that you can teach Spanish literature now looking at the African in the Spanish literature and I guess that to an Afro-American student it would be a lot more interesting to learn literature or learn Spanish if you have that approach than if you just go into a dry

classroom setting and start saying "This is Spanish." So I guess if teachers see that and can integrate what we're going to be reviewing in those ten days into a classroom experience, it's going to be a lot more fun to teach any subject that has to do with the Latin American perspective, in general. What I would like to see happen afterward, is that any teacher or instructor that comes and goes through that ten-day experience will have had fun and can bring that fun back into their classroom settings. That's what I would like to see.

SW: Could you describe what "selling points" you would offer to K-12 faculty about this program? What gap is this program going to fill? You mentioned that it would serve as a point of interest for African-American students, to give them a point of departure for learning Spanish. But for the students who aren't African-American, what sorts of things can their teachers can bring back to them as a benefit?

BJ: This program is going to be more people oriented, meaning it's going to be more oriented toward the community of the host country. If you go to the program here in the Dominican Republic you will learn what a Dominican is; you will get more involved into what Dominicans are. And that's what any teacher can bring back to their classroom experience. Once you get into a city or country you begin to enjoy that and you learn and then you bring that back to the classroom. It's like bringing a video but the video is you. I think that's a lot when you can do that. If you can enjoy that experience, the classroom is going to grow.

SW: Do you see a way that the program could also be a benefit for the educational system of the host countries?

BJ: We are involving professors from the host countries and professors from the United States in the program. This is not a program that's going to be run by one group of people in one country. It's going to be run by professors from the U.S. and professors from the host countries. And that will give us the synergism that we need to have the program run in a way so that it ends up being beneficial to both professors here and professors there. Now we cannot say that this program is geared toward people in the host country. It's geared mainly toward people in the U.S., Canada and Europe. We designed it that way. Why? We designed it that way because we feel that if we can get the teachers in these so-called developed countries today to look at the host country communities, it would be a bigger benefit to those communities rather than by just creating more awareness among the local people. That's why we're doing it that way. We believe that if we can create awareness between the English, French and the Spanish about the situation of the people in Vallajuna, it will do two things. It will make them aware that when they eat bread, what eating that bread means for the people in La Maguana. But also it might make them aware that they can contribute a little bit to the people of La Maguana by bringing a professor from La Maguana to learn about using a computer, or something of that nature. We believe that that's what we want to do at this stage. I know that at the end we will do a lot more with teachers from the host countries in our classes but we need to start like this for two reasons. One, we need the people that can pay. Two, if we can get an American to think that "Wow, there are brothers there in Panamá that have been going through this struggle."

That's bringing humanity to a bunch of people who don't have it today and that's more effective than going to the people that don't have the humanity and making them realize that they do have humanity.

SW: How did the idea for this program come about?

BJ: The main thing is that I've been working for the Organization for Africans in the Americas for around eight years. They've been studying the community and talking about it. It's an uphill battle. You go to the Latin American Development Bank and you go to the World Bank and you fight with AID, but those are just fights. You keep on fighting and what are you going to get? Another fight. You fight today; you win a war and tomorrow, another war. You keep on fighting. So I sat down with them and I said, "Listen. I think we should have an educational program where we can bring information to people, get people the information and let them work with it, have workshops. You're free; it's a democracy. I don't have to beat you with this information. I will show it to you, share it with you, review it with you, and discuss it and if you say "That's a bunch of bologna", then it's a bunch of bologna. But if you say "Hey, we can work with it", then we can work with it. That would be more helpful than keeping up the battle. I'm not saying we shouldn't keep fighting; we're going to keep on fighting, but at the same time this is another route in which we can share and maybe even grow. That's the way it started. We said we could do it and do it in a way that people would have fun. We're not saying this is just a classroom setting, we're saying we'll do it in a way that the faculty will see Santo Domingo as it is, see "la gente", the people. The people are not the government, not the system, it's

just the people. Once you experience that, you get back to the bond of humanity. And we need that in this communication age, we need to go back to that. It's a valid need that we will be covering in the program.

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