

DOMINICAN DIASPORA SOUTH FLORIDA IS HOME TO THOUSANDS FROM THE CARIBBEAN ISLAND NATION - MANY BY WAY OF NEW YORK CITY

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Most Cubans in south Florida come here from Cuba. Most Argentineans come from Argentina. And, most Dominicans come here from...New York.

“There is a large community of people from the Dominican Republic in the New York City area,” explained David Encarnación, a Miramar resident who works in Fort Lauderdale as a stockbroker. “But, many of them are moving here because they like the area, which reminds them of their country. They also like the quality of life and they don’t have to deal with cold and snow.”

Indeed, the 2000 census showed that there were 10,498 people of Dominican heritage in Broward County, up from 3,489 in 1990, 36,454 in Miami-Dade, up from 23,475 a decade ago and 3,649 in Palm Beach County, an increase from 1,155 in 1990.

Some Dominicans put the Broward number closer to 20,000, saying that more and more of their fellow countrymen are also moving north to escape the urban congestion of Miami, especially in the Allapattah community, where there is a large concentration of Dominican businesses.

Several hundred south Florida Dominicans gather every Sunday afternoon at Miami’s Juan Pablo Duarte park in Allapattah to eat typical foods, play games and exchange news about their community and family back in the Dominican Republic.

“We are very family oriented,” said Lily Guzman who lives in Miramar and operates a software development company in Fort Lauderdale. “Dominicans tend to congregate. If one person opens a restaurant, another Dominican will open a travel agency next door, then another will open a beauty parlor down the street.”

With a growing Dominican population in southern Broward County, social and civic organizations are also springing up. Typical is the Club Quisqueyanos (the indigenous name for the Dominican Republic), a sports and cultural club in Miramar that organizes sports teams and artistic events for area residents.

“We also host social events and sponsor groups such as a folkloric dance team,” said the center’s director, Carlisa Rivas of Pembroke Pines. Rivas said that her group also provides classes and clubs in Dominican art and crafts.

In celebration of the Dominican Republic’s Independence Day on February 27, the club will sponsor a conference and cultural exhibition on Monday, February 25 at 7 p.m. The event will feature traditional poetry, literature, stories and patriotic songs along with a dance presentation by a folkloric group.

Area Dominican residents say that they differ somewhat from other Latin groups that have immigrated to south Florida. “We are very traditional,” explained Rogely Diaz, the Administrative

Director of the Dominican-American Chamber of Commerce who moved to south Florida from New York ten years ago. “We pass everything on to our children, even our language,” she said, explaining that she speaks Spanish to her children at home.

“We are different from other groups, such as the Cubans whose younger people are using more English and less Spanish,” she said. “We have not given in to that. Perhaps it’s because we can curse better and discipline better in Spanish.”

Describing Dominicans as “free spirits, more like Brazilians,” Diaz said that her fellow countrymen are “party animals” who like to have fun. “When people come into our office, they find that we are often laughing. They ask us what is so funny and we tell them, there is nothing funny, we just like to laugh.”

On a more serious side, Diaz says that Dominicans like to “treat people like they want to be treated,” and they are very hospitable. Referring to tourism, she said, “We realize that for the most part, the hand that feeds our people comes from other countries.”

That hospitality and the growing number of Dominicans living in Broward County has led the Dominican Ministry of Tourism to establish an office in Fort Lauderdale. “We are directing our services at both Dominicans and non-Dominicans who would want to vacation in the Caribbean,” explained Marilyn Recio de Pérez who is temporarily directing the office from her home in Coral Springs.

There is interest among non-Dominicans in traveling to the island according to Luisa Verges, a travel agent who lived in New York for 20 years before moving to Boca Raton nine years ago. “I organize a lot of groups to travel there and at least half of them are not Dominicans,” she reported.

Recio said that one of her goals is to develop direct flights between the Fort Lauderdale Hollywood International Airport and the Dominican Republic.

Speaking about her country with obvious pride, Recio described popular beach resorts such as Punta Cana, historic sites including the house where Juan Ponce de León lived before leaving for Puerto Rico and Florida, and alternative opportunities for travel including study, university research and eco-tourism.

The country is also becoming a popular venue for business conventions. “The largest convention center in the Caribbean is in Punta Cana and many other hotels have large meeting rooms,” she said. The Dominican Republic boasts eight international airports, three million tourists a year and 54 thousand hotel rooms.

“Tourism is the number one source of income to our country,” Recio reported.

José Torres, a Cooper City resident who owns an insurance office in Hollywood, views that statistic from another perspective. “Some say that remittances sent by Dominicans to their families back home are really the number one source of income because wiring money involves no investment

while it costs money to attract tourists,” he said. Torres is also the president of the Dominican-American Chamber of Commerce.

“We have strong ties to the island because it is so close to the mainland and people can travel back and forth easily,” he explained. “Dominicans here have a strong influence on politics back home and frequently play an active role there.”

Some Dominicans here wish that their counterparts would be as involved in south Florida political and civic affairs.

“The problems in our community are education and civic involvement,” said Guzman, a Republican, who ran for a seat in the Florida House of Representatives in 1986 and 1988. “We encourage parents to get involved, to participate in their local PTA and to have their voices heard.”

Guzman said that it is ironic that in the Dominican Republic, “kids know and talk about politics, but when they arrive here, Dominicans concentrate on the concerns of being an immigrant and don’t get involved.”

She said that her fellow Dominicans are hard working people, but she encourages them “not to let things happen but to happen to things.”

“This is a country where the system works,” she explained. “We are trying to educate our people to be involved in the community and to run for office.”

While working hard to make their way in the United States, Dominicans carry many customs from back home.

“We love Mangú, which is made up of plantains cooked with onions, oil and vinegar, salted and served with fried cheese and salchichas (sausage),” said Carmen Morel of Davie. “That’s breakfast,” she explained.

“A typical meal is beans with rice served along with chicken or steak,” added Gina Rodriguez of Davie. “That meal is so common we call it the Dominican Flag,” she said.

The two women explained their delicacies recently as they were serving pastillos, a common meat-filled pastry (similar to empanadas in other Latin American countries) to a large crowd at a Dominican baseball tournament in Fort Lauderdale’s Sunview Park.

“Baseball is a passion for us Dominicans,” explained Ricardo Gomez of Pompano Beach who owns the United Baseball Academy where he trains high school athletes for college and professional teams. “The sport is popular among our people because we are so close to Cuba and Puerto Rico where it is also popular,” he said.

“We could form our own major league team just of Dominicans,” said Torres, only half joking. “There are 120 Dominican players in the Major Leagues, not counting those in the various minor league divisions.

Torres said that Dominicans are very proud of their fellow countryman, Chicago Cubs Right Fielder Sammy Sosa, but immediately pressed on to name other well-known Dominican players such as Juan Marichal, Pedro Martínez and Alex Rodriguez. “Sammy Sosa has remained close to the Dominican community in the United States,” Torres said. “All of the players have been very generous in helping the needy in our country back home.”

Miramar’s Club Quisqueyanos sponsors two major baseball tournaments a year, involving four teams that play each other for several weeks until a champion is crowned.

For now, Dominicans are looking forward to their upcoming Independence Day celebrations. “Many of our people wear masks for the holiday and hold parades and dances in costume,” explained Hugo De La Rosa of Hollywood.

“Dominicans are a very happy people,” added Recio. “They feel very proud of their music and culture and are always looking for an excuse to party and dance the Merengue.”

SIDEBAR

As part of celebrations for the Dominican Republic’s Independence Day, February 27, several organizations are planning activities.

Friday, February 22—7 p.m.

Festival

- Typical Dominican food
- Typical music and entertainment

Hyatt Regency Hotel

400

SE

Second

Avenue

Miami

Saturday, February 23, 12 noon

Cultural Festival

- Typical Dominican music
- Educational activities
- Community orientation
- Sports

Juan Pablo Duarte Park, Allapattah neighborhood of Miami

Saturday, February 23, 7 p.m.

Concert

- Traditional and classical music
- Dominican folkloric dance

Location to be announced

Sunday, February 24, 9:30 a.m.

Mass in honor of the heroes of Independence

Altagracia Mission
18th Avenue and 29th Street
Miami

Sunday, February 24, 12 noon
Cultural and Sports Festival
Juan Pablo Duarte Park, Allapattah neighborhood of Miami

Sunday, February 24, 7 p.m.
Patriotic Program
Hyatt Regency Hotel
400 SE Second Avenue
Miami

Monday, February 25, 7 p.m.
Lecture-Conference and Cultural Exhibition

- Literature, poems, stories, patriotic songs
- Folkloric ballet

Club Los Quisqueyanos
2320 SW 60th Terrace
Miramar

Tuesday, February 26, 7 p.m.
Community Workshop

- Strategic planning for the Dominican community

Hispanic Club House
1717 NW 17th Avenue
Miami

Wednesday, February 27, 7 p.m.
Grand Final Concert

- Los Hermanos Rosario
- Grupo Kemambo
- Ballet Folclorico de la Secretaria de Turismo
- Diablos Cojuelos y mas

Dade Country Auditorium
2901 West Flagler Street
Miami

For information on any of these events, call 305-358-3220

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