

# Fisher students visit developing democracy

By Lee Strong  
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Michael App said he may never forget the image of a Dominican woman holding her sick child.

A St. John Fisher College senior, App was sitting in a restaurant in the Santo Domingo — the capital of the Dominican Republic — when he spotted the woman. He recalled that she appeared to be in her mid 20s, and stood watching him and his fellow students.

"You see this mother trying to eke out an existence, not just for herself but for her child, and you know the child will be dead in six months, or a year, because of malnutrition," App said.

App and a group of 27 people traveled to the Caribbean nation for a study tour March 9-19. The excursion was part of a St. John Fisher College course designed to look at the history, politics, economics and social system in the Dominican Republic.

According to the professor of the course, Richard Hillman, who accompanied the students, the trip's main purpose was to give students the experience of visiting a developing nation.

"It's one thing to read about and discuss problems in developing areas, and it's quite another to be able to live amidst the problems, to interview people, and to experience it firsthand," Hillman said.

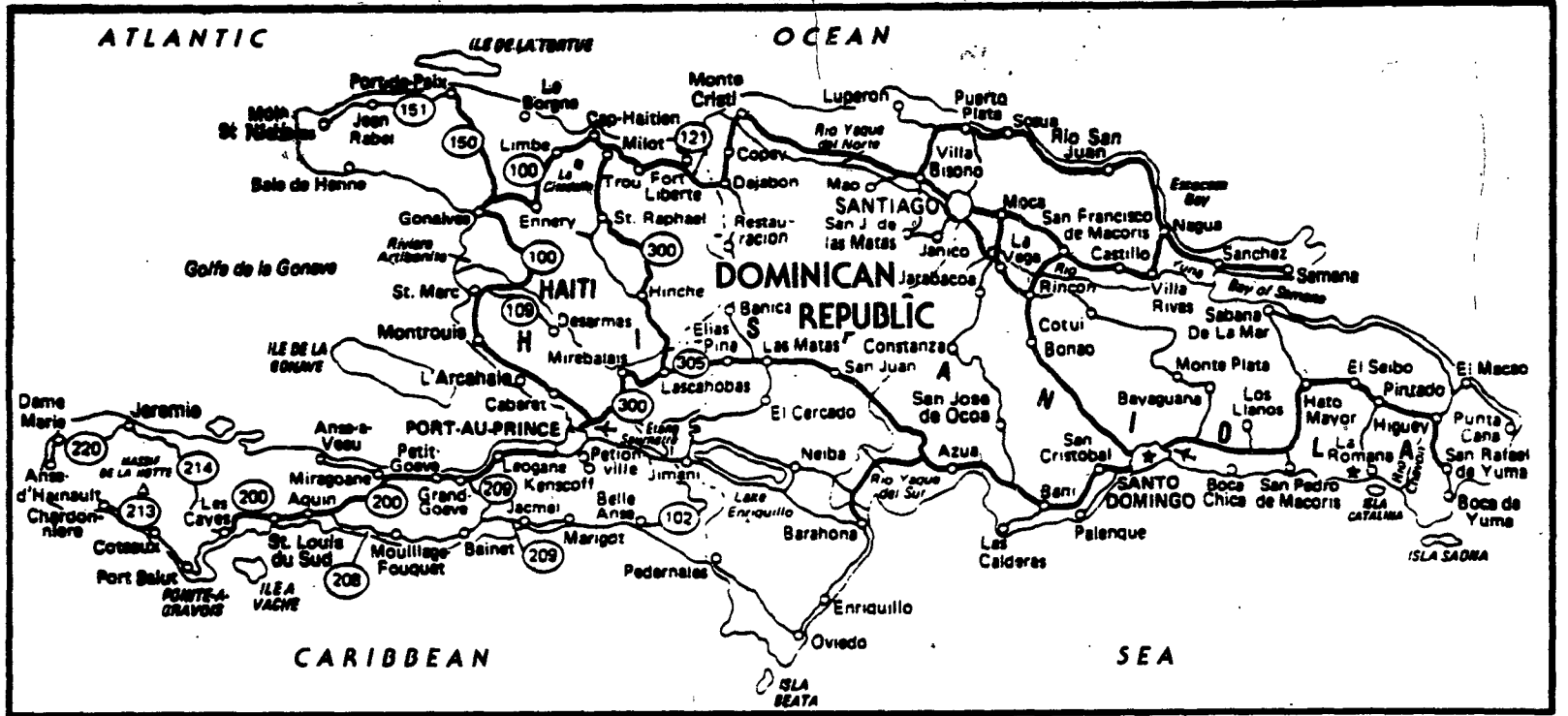
During their stay, students lived at the University of Santo Domingo. Their mornings were spent listening to lectures about the country. After eating lunch, students visited with members of various political parties, including one of the country's leading presidential candidates, Juan Bosch.

Hillman described the country as a perfect case study for the students.

"It is a country that represents all the realities of Third World development in a dramatic way, and a country with a



Washington De Pena (left) of the Partido Revolucionario Dominicano, and professor Richard Hillman answer questions during a morning seminar.



democratic tradition," Hillman observed. He noted that the timing of the trip was perfect because the Dominican Republic is in the midst of a presidential campaign. The election is scheduled for May 16.

Hillman developed the idea for the trip together with Fisher senior Eric Perichi, who is a citizen of the Dominican Republic.

Perichi said that during his four years at Fisher, he had discovered many differences between politics in the two countries. He thought that it would be beneficial for Fisher students to experience his country firsthand in order to discover differences for themselves.

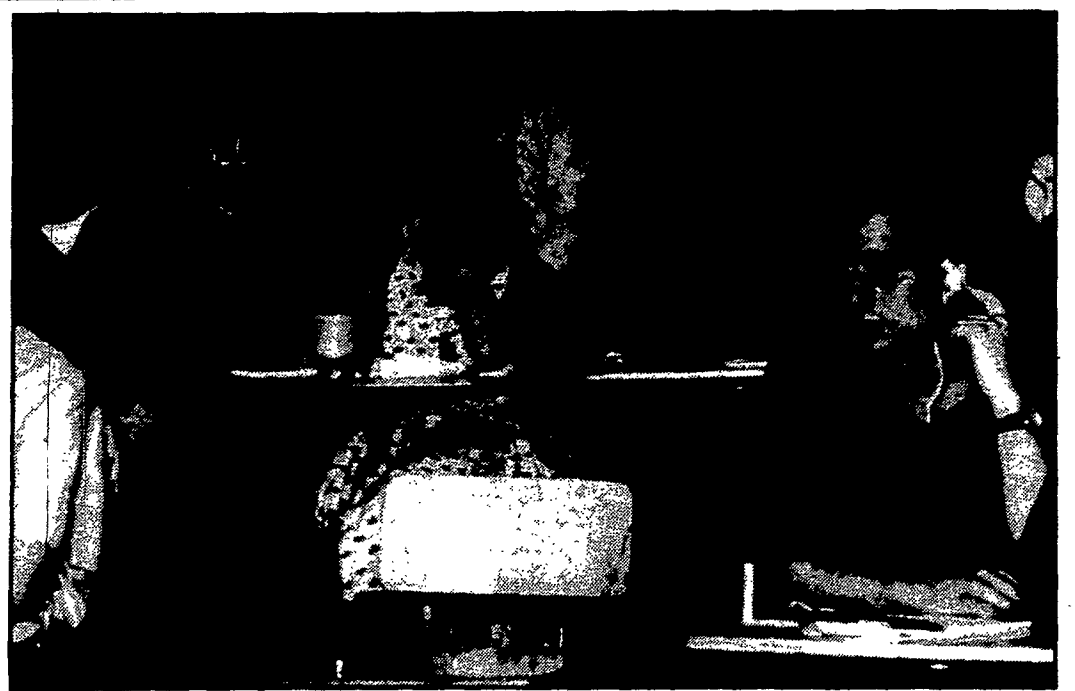
Thomas D'Agostino, a Fisher graduate currently working on a doctorate in political science at Syracuse University, was another member of the group. He noted that the Dominican people were much more involved in the political process than U.S. citizens. Because Dominicans believe that the outcome of an election will directly affect their lives, they take more interest in the political process, D'Agostino said.

"If your party's in control of the government, you'll be taken care of," D'Agostino said. "If it's not, then it's hard on you."

App observed that while people in the United States vote for the candidate they like, citizens of the Dominican Republic appear to vote for the candidate they dislike the least.

"It's a politics of hate," App said. "You vote for somebody because you believe the opposite is even worse."

Fisher students quickly learned not to judge the situation in the Dominican Republic in light of their own experiences in the United States, App said. "We've had 200 years of democracy, versus 30 there," he explained. "These people are feeling out what democracy is."



A simultaneous translation service was provided for students who did not speak Spanish.

In addition, App said, the students had to get used to the widespread tension created because of the campaign. He noted that many people were armed, causing students to stay away from political rallies because of the threat of violence. "We made sure we were careful who we talked about politics with," he added.

Experiencing the political process in the Dominican Republic also helped the students look at the U.S. political system a little more critically.

"It just seems everyone takes it more seriously there. Maybe we're too comfortable," observed sophomore Debora McDell.

Perichi added that the Dominican Republic is a country at a crossroads. The two leading candidates — Bosch and the current president, Ricardo Balaguer — are

both octogenarians, and have been at the forefront of the country's political scene since the early 1960s. This campaign may be the last time they face each other.

"What this made me aware of is the need for new leaders, new structures in the political system," Perichi said.

Fisher students are now working on research projects based on their trip to the Dominican Republic. Meanwhile, Hillman said, officials from Fisher and the University of Santo Domingo are working on future endeavors, including the possibility of future trips.

D'Agostino, who plans a career in teaching, said he hopes to have the opportunity to take his students on similar trips.

"I think that's the greatest experience anyone can have," D'Agostino said.



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