

HAITIAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT FOUNDATION
Willingness, Know-How, Resources

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"FROM THE MOUNTAINS TO THE SEA"
From Charity to Development



Return to the Alma Mater, a MexHaitians in Mexico

After decades of careers spread across the globe, particularly in the United States, the MexHaitians relived an exceptional moment: their third annual reunion in Mexico City, the vibrant Mexican capital. It was a true pilgrimage for these former Haitian students who, in their youth, roamed the halls of Mexican universities, forged lasting friendships, and discovered a country that became their second home. This trip was more than just a reunion; it was an opportunity to reconnect with past memories, reminisce about the carefree years of learning, and relive, if only for a few days, the camaraderie and energy of their youth.

Composed of seasoned professionals, this heterogeneous group of former young students, now experts in various fields thanks to their academic training in Mexico, is driven by a deep sense of gratitude and belonging. The MexHaitians share more than just diplomas: they are bound by a shared experience that has shaped their personal and professional journeys, united by cultural, emotional, and academic ties. These ambassadors of Haitian-Mexican friendship also aim to become agents of change. Their goal? To put their expertise at the service of Mexico's humanitarian programs in Haiti, particularly in the health and agriculture sectors, to strengthen the bridges between their two adopted nations.

In 1966, the life of Haitian students in Mexico oscillated between academic rigor and the carefree pleasures of youth. Mornings began with a frantic race to arrive on time for dissection classes. Professor Hernandez, known for his inflexible punctuality, closed the door at precisely 7:00 a.m. Anyone arriving late, even by a few seconds, could say goodbye to their dissection future. With my dissection cadaver nicknamed "Pepe," each morning was an actual against time. Being late for four classes meant certain failure, a more terrifying prospect than memorizing the cranium!

However, once the books were closed and the dissection tools were stored away, the activities took a very different turn. On Saturday nights, the Haitian students would gather for lively dance parties in Colonia Narvarte, where they tried to charm the lovely local girls. It was a delicate balance between embryology, dissection, anatomy, biochemistry classes, and the mambo and compas direct steps.

At that time, Mexico City was dubbed “the paradise of flowers, hearts, and love.” With only 7 million inhabitants, it offered an idyllic setting with tree-lined avenues, flower-filled parks, and a peaceful atmosphere. Strolls along Insurgentes, Xola, or Reforma felt more like countryside walks than crossing major urban arteries. Today, the Mexican capital, with over 22 million inhabitants, has become a vibrant and bustling megacity where chaos and noise have replaced the tranquility of yesteryear. For me, returning after so many years, the transformation is astonishing. Yet, amidst this urban whirlwind, a few rare spots still evoke the romantic and bucolic city of the 1960s, like a distant echo of a bygone era. Some things, like cultural richness, human warmth, and the unwavering pride of Mexicans in their history, remain unchanged.

Revisiting my medical school at UNAM was like a leap through time, a frog leap straight from the 1960s to the 21st century! In my day, the walls were adorned with yellowed educational posters. Slides, the high-tech tools of the time, were projected onto a screen using a noisy overhead projector. The professor, half-teacher, half-magician, juggled these precious plastic slides while sketching diagrams with chalk on blackboards, inevitably raising the traditional cloud of dust. Today, entering one of these new high-tech classrooms, I felt like I had landed in an episode of *Star Trek*. Interactive boards replaced the old blackboards, and students frantically tapped on their keyboards. I almost asked where the overhead projectors and good old chalk had gone!

I felt like a dinosaur lost in a technological park. Reality quickly caught up with me when a young student, who could have been my grandson's age, asked me to discuss my experiences. Seeing his face full of curiosity and enthusiasm, I realized that while tools and methods have evolved, the essence of learning remains the same: a passionate quest for knowledge, whether armed with chalk or a keyboard.

The professors, many much younger than my first gray hairs, skillfully manipulated these digital gadgets with disconcerting ease. If I had had a computer in the 1960s, I would have certainly avoided many sleepless nights typing my notes on my faithful typewriter, an Olivetti, praying not to make any mistakes. And while we're at it, I remember Coni, a girlfriend who prided herself on being a real technological pioneer. She worked as a specialist in "punch cards" at Seguro Social, inserting these famous cards into a gigantic computer that, in 1967,

represented the future. This machine, a true ancestor of smartphones, took up an entire room and required almost an army to operate. Oh, how far we've come!

During our visit to the UNAM architecture faculty, a lively discussion quickly arose with a professor and a few students. A curious student asked me, "Dr. Castor, how has architecture evolved in Mexico since the 1960s?" With a smile tinged with nostalgia, I replied, "Back then, architecture was often limited to simple, functional concrete boxes but not very poetic. Today, your buildings have become real works of art, full of curves, light, and creativity. A real leap forward!" The amused professor added, "Take the Central Library, for example; it's much more than a building. It's a living fresco of Mexican history. Juan O'Gorman designed it to tell centuries of culture through its magnificent colorful mosaics."

A student, with barely concealed pride, reminded me: "And the famous Diego Rivera mural at the medical school? It represents medicine through the ages; it's our national treasure!" I smiled, remembering that, even in my day, that mural was already there, but it wasn't the frescoes we paid as much attention to as the protest graffiti that students adorned the other university walls with.

As I strolled through the faculty, I realized how much the university campus had changed while remaining true to its creative spirit. UNAM has managed to keep its vibrant and rebellious soul, even in the midst of this overflowing modernity. It has skillfully married tradition and innovation - a real feat!

Leaving UNAM, we glimpsed the majestic University Olympic Stadium from our bus. Its stone frescoes, harmoniously fusing pre-Columbian art with modern architecture, bear witness to an era where tradition and modernity coexisted. Built in 1952, this iconic stadium hosted the 1968 Olympic Games, embodying a crucial chapter in Mexico's history.

Indeed, Mexico was the stage of major social upheavals. Ten days before the start of the Olympics, on October 2, 1968, Mexican armed forces opened fire on peaceful protesters gathered at the Plaza de las Tres Culturas, during the infamous Tlatelolco massacre. The protestors, mostly students from the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), the National Polytechnic Institute (IPN), and other universities, were denouncing the cost of the Olympic Games and the increasing repression under the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) regime.

The number of victims remains uncertain, with estimates ranging from 44 to 400 dead and over 1,300 arrests. Although the massacre shook the nation, the Olympic Games nonetheless proceeded as planned, creating a striking contrast between the sporting euphoria and the national tragedy that had just unfolded. This episode serves as a reminder that even in moments of celebration, history is often tinged with contradictions.

Two days after the Tlatelolco events, a social sciences student nicknamed “El Chirrisco,” always as excited as a flea and leading all the anti-government demonstrations, wanted by the police, had found refuge on the *azotea* (roof) of our building. When Chucho's mother, my roommate, heard the news, she was terrified by the chaotic situation. Señora Espinoza, fearing for our safety, decided made us leave the capital to join her at her home in Acapulco. UNAM had been closed and occupied by the military for two weeks on the orders of President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz. What a sacrifice! Between the paradisiacal beaches and naps under the coconut trees, our “exile” resembled more an improvised vacation than an escape. Indeed, the misfortune of some can sometimes bring happiness to others... especially when that happiness includes beautiful girls on the beaches of Acapulco.

We arrived in Tlalpan for a memorable lunch at the Arroyo restaurant, where we truly immersed ourselves in the heart of Mexican culture. This place is a true maze of culinary traditions. In this vibrant and colorful setting, I rediscovered a taste of Mexico that I had sorely missed: *barbacoa de borrego*. This lamb, slowly roasted over a barbecue, wrapped in maguey leaves, and steamed for hours, literally melted in your mouth. But the real revelation was the *consomé de borrego*: a comforting soup made from the lamb's cooking juices, rich with deep and delicate flavors. A true nectar, as if all of Mexico had distilled itself into this single spoonful!

Between the bursts of laughter, the passionate tunes of the mariachis, and the animated conversations at the table, I realized just how much this experience went beyond a simple meal. It was a complete immersion into Mexican hospitality, where flavors, music, and traditions blended harmoniously so every moment became something to savor. It was a feast not just for the senses but also for the soul!

An evening spent listening to mariachis serenading lovers at Plaza Garibaldi was a truly enchanting, almost magical, experience. The mariachis, dressed in elegant costumes, moved from group to group, offering serenades to couples under the stars. Whether joyful or melancholic, every song told a story of love, passion, or heartbreak. The violins resonated, the trumpets soared like an open-air opera, and each note seemed to find its way to everyone's heart, touching us all, captivated by the performance. Reliving these moments brought me a sweet nostalgia as if a part of my student days had resurfaced.

My academic journey at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) and my immersion in dynamic Mexican culture instilled in me a strong intellectual discipline and an insatiable curiosity, which later opened the doors to the New York Medical College, where I specialized in obstetrics and gynecology. In Lafayette, Louisiana, my career was built on these solid foundations and the influence of my Mexican years. This foundation reflects in my holistic approach to medicine, where I always strive to see the person behind the patient. I owe this humanistic approach to my passionate Mexican professors, such as Dr. Trifón de la Sierra, my professor of Integral Basic Nosology, and Dr. Luis Perez Tamayo, my professor of Pathology, among many others.

My commitment to Haiti stems from the values I acquired at UNAM, which taught me the importance of giving back to the community and being a force for social change. Today, through the Haitian Resource Development Foundation (HRDF), I am putting these skills to work, contributing to the development of my homeland. The collaboration between the MexHaitians, UNAM, and Mexican institutions offers a tangible opportunity to strengthen ties between Mexico and Haiti, focusing on projects adapted to Haiti's realities, particularly in rural areas.

One of the flagship projects under consideration is to establish a distance learning medical branch. Based on modern technologies such as webinars and videoconferencing, this program will target remote regions of Haiti where access to medical care is extremely limited. Inspired by UNAM's successful initiatives in countries like El Salvador, this project aims to improve healthcare quality and accessibility in Haiti by transferring medical knowledge to rural areas.

In parallel, Mexican agricultural initiatives such as “Sembrando Vida” could offer tremendous value in supporting small farmers in Haiti's targeted regions in partnership with institutions like Chapingo. These pilot projects are designed to promote sustainable agricultural practices and reinforce ecological resilience.

In short, these initiatives proposed by the MexHaitians, in collaboration with UNAM, represent opportunities for sustainable development in Haiti. They offer concrete solutions to local challenges while strengthening cultural and academic ties between the two countries.

To crown our Mexican pilgrimage in style, the MexHaitians attended a performance of the Folkloric Ballet of Mexico [Ballet Folklórico de México] at the majestic Palace of Fine Arts [Palacio de Bellas Artes]. This architectural gem harmoniously combines Art Deco interiors with Art nouveau exteriors. However, before fully

immersing myself in the show, my scientific mind stirred. I had an irresistible urge to check if the building had sunk further since my last visit in the late 1960s. Given the building's size, it's well-known that it slowly sinks into its foundations. Sadly, I hadn't marked the base back then for a proper comparison. Next time, I'll be prepared. Scientific rigor calls for it!

Inside, was a true explosion of colors, rhythms, and traditions. The Ballet Folklórico delivered a captivating performance, showcasing regional dances, each more vibrant than the last. From the famous Jarabe Tapatío, the renowned Mexican hat dance, to the mystical Dance of the Deer [Danza del Venado] with its ancestral rituals, I was transported across Mexico's cultures and history. The dazzling costumes and the live mariachi music all blended into a magical show. More than just a performance, it was a journey through time, where even the impeccable acoustics of the palace resonated with our memories, wrapping us in a warm, vibrant nostalgia.

Returning to Mexico and revisiting UNAM rekindled within me a profound gratitude for this place where I learned and grew so much. More than just an institution, UNAM is a true home of ideas and memories. It embodies the cultural richness, openness, and academic excellence that shaped much of the person I am today.

I call on the younger generations of Haitians and all those who, like me, have had the chance to forge connections with this wonderful nation. Let us be bridges between our two countries and open new paths of hope and progress together. And perhaps one day, you too will return, your heart filled with nostalgia, ready to share stories of the good old UNAM... over a well-deserved *taco al pastor*!

Aldy Castor MD, MexHaitians

Haitians and Mexicans Together, Sowing Life and Reaping Health, From the Mountains to the Sea – “The energy of our two peoples will forge our destiny”

October 9, 2020