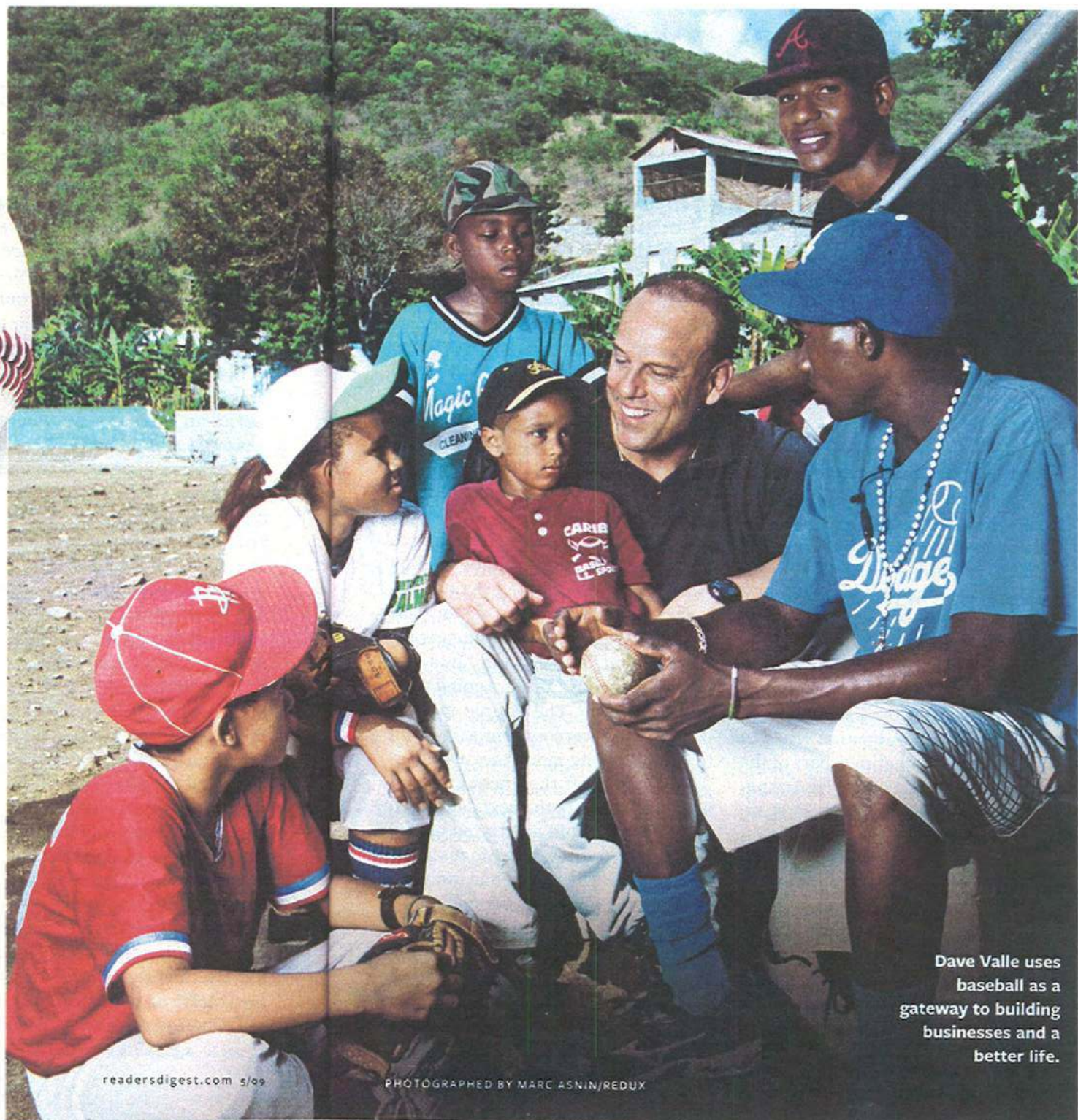




Former major leaguer **Dave Valle** could have retired to the golf course when he hung up his catcher's glove. Instead, he returned to the Dominican Republic to keep a promise.

BY TODD PITOCK



Dave Valle uses baseball as a gateway to building businesses and a better life.

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PHOTOGRAPHED BY MARC ASIN/REDUX

The game had ended.

The last fans straggled out past kiosk vendors packing up for the night, and as the lights of the dilapidated baseball stadium shut down, the surrounding neighborhood fell into shadows.

It was 1985, and a young American player named Dave Valle was honing his skills in the Dominican Republic's winter league. Along with his wife, Vicky, and their infant son, Philip, he lived at a hotel in Santo Domingo, the Caribbean nation's capital, and was bused to games.

That night, the bus was late, and Valle, who played for the Seattle Mariners back home, was still in the uniform of his Dominican team, the San Cristóbal Caimanes. He and Vicky waited with the baby. There were always kids around. Adulation was part of the fun, and sometimes part of the burden, of being a ballplayer, especially in the baseball-crazy Dominican Republic.

Valle quickly realized, though, that these kids weren't looking for an autograph. They didn't care about baseball or who he was. They were hungry. They had picked through the garbage, and now workers were hauling it away.

It was painful to watch. Valle, a six-two, well-muscled catcher, was no stranger to pain. You blocked balls in

the dirt. You did your best to keep your head and neck attached when players charged home plate. Pain was part of the job. But it was one thing to take it in the chest, quite another to feel it in the heart.

He'd seen poor children before. Now, though, as he looked on, he was aware of the soft weight of his own swaddled son in his arms. The miracle of seeing him born had reinforced his faith and changed how he saw the world. What if it were my son who was so hungry and desperate? he thought.

One of the kiosk vendors sold fried chicken and potatoes. The Valles told her to cook up whatever she had left and feed the children.

At first, it felt good to help. But as they reflected on the incident, they knew they were kidding themselves if they thought they'd made any difference. "We satisfied their hunger for the moment," Vicky said. "In a few more hours, those kids are going to be hungry again." The couple made a pact: If they were ever in a position to do something more, they would.

Valle slept off the encounter and went back to work the next day. When you're 25 years old and trying to stay in the big leagues, your focus is on how to hit a slider down and away. Six years later, Valle was a veteran player when fortune shone on him with a lucrative three-year deal.

"Now it's time," Vicky said.

"Time for what?" he asked.

"To help those kids," she said. "Like we promised."

"The idea isn't to make better baseball players," Valle said. "It's to use this great passion and energy and mobilize people."

The Game Plan

Last November, I met with Valle in the Dominican Republic to see the results of that promise, a nonprofit he and Vicky established in 1995 with \$30,000 of their own savings. Esperanza, which means "hope" in Spanish, is a microcredit agency, offering short-term, low-interest loans starting at about \$150 to help extremely poor people get started in business.

Although microcredit banking has been around since the 1970s, Esperanza added other elements, creating a school, a dozen computer training centers, a member-funded health care plan, a water treatment system, and a home improvement initiative. It has also spearheaded the construction of five baseball fields that would be the envy of many affluent communities in America, fitting the sport into its broader goal of community development.

We started our tour in Santo Domingo—Valle, son Philip, now 23, and Esperanza's executive director, Carlos Pimentel—and drove north over a mountain range soaring 9,000 feet, dense with thick, lush jungle.

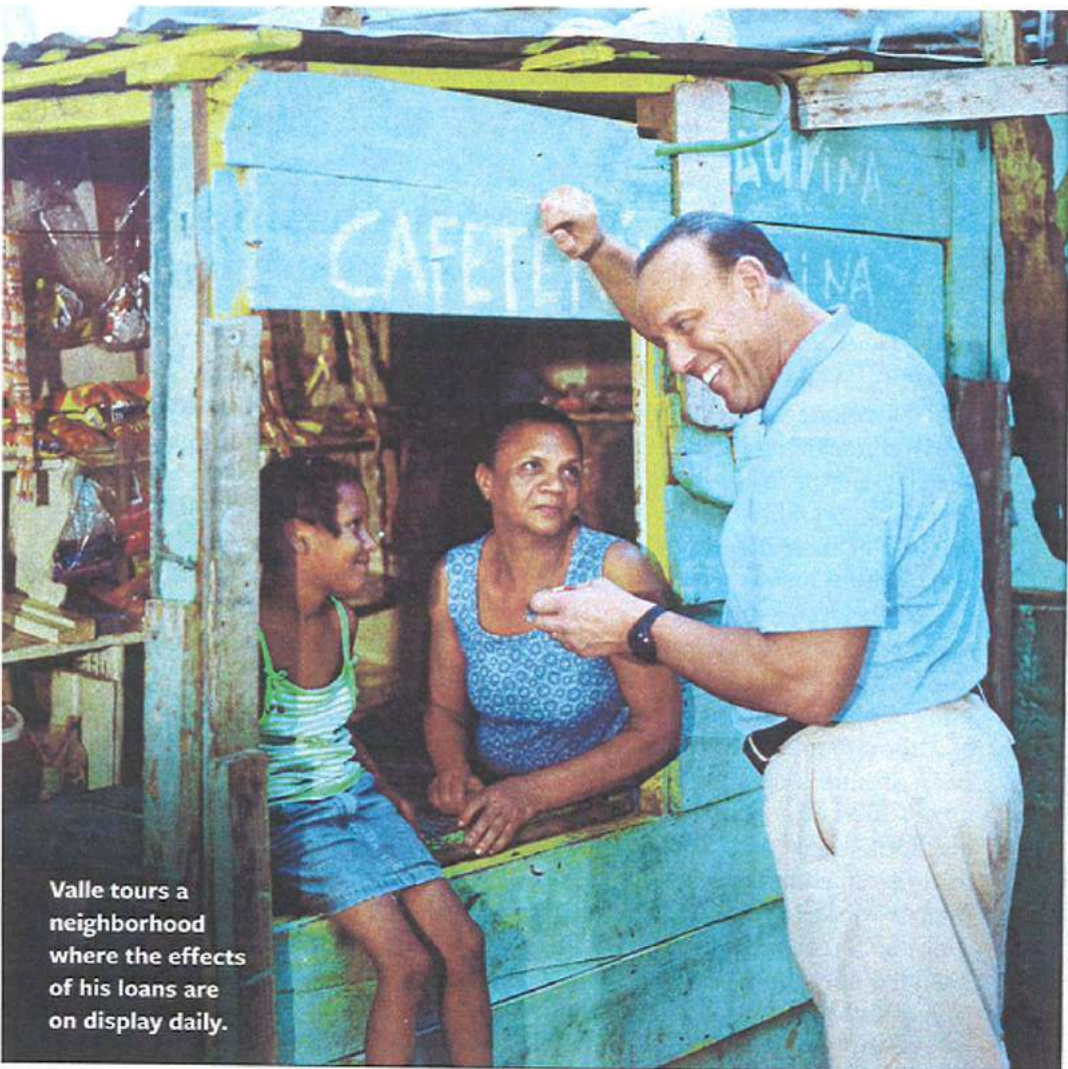
At a glance, a visitor could be lulled into thinking that all is well in the Dominican Republic. In addition to hav-

ing enchanting scenery, the country has recently experienced between 7 and 10 percent in annual growth. Modern highways sport an astonishing number of SUVs. New real estate and tourism districts, such as Cap Cana on the east coast, are positively opulent, and indeed, even the pastel colors on many shanties balanced on hillsides suggest more cheer than perhaps they should.

But they can't paint over the reality for many Dominicans. Of 9.3 million people, 2 million live on less than \$2 a day. Twenty percent of girls become pregnant before they're 19, and illiteracy and crime are pervasive. Despite promising economic progress early in the decade, the nation's gross domestic product plunged 15 percent several years ago. Haiti, which shares the island that Christopher Columbus called Hispaniola when he landed there in 1492, is even worse off.

The desperately poor are, of course, Esperanza's focus—people for whom it is not a credit crunch but a crush, whose only access to capital would be through loan sharks charging usurious interest rates.

Here is how microcredit works: People with ideas for businesses get together and apply as a group for a



Valle tours a neighborhood where the effects of his loans are on display daily.

loan, or what Esperanza calls a bank of hope. Typical ventures include sundries shops, hair salons, and roadside eateries. Members are almost always neighbors, and they pledge responsibility for one another. At twice-monthly repayment meetings, they cover for anyone who may be short, all of which fosters mutual support and obligation. Repayment rates are 98 percent in the Dominican Republic

as well as in Haiti, where Esperanza launched in early 2006. Once debts are settled, borrowers negotiate new loans.

As word of Esperanza spread, the pace of lending accelerated. With 20 borrowers when it began lending in 1995, Esperanza has since dispersed almost \$15 million through 75,000 loans, including nearly 21,500 active accounts in 2008. It has 2,800 bor-

rowers in Haiti. The organization estimates that at least five people benefit from each loan in the Dominican Republic, and six in Haiti.

"Traditional aid methods, handouts, haven't worked," said Pimentel, a Dominican who previously worked for CARE in Somalia. "People have to take ownership of the process and learn to be responsible. That's the key to our method. We'll give the resources and training, but you need to bring the spirit and responsibility."

Eighty-eight percent of borrowers are women. Usually, the term *single-parent household* refers to the mother. "Our goal was always to help children," Valle said. "We figured out that in order to do that, we needed to help their mothers."

Fields of Dreams

Valle wanted to introduce me to the faces behind the statistics. We entered Hoyo de Bartola, a barrio on the outskirts of Santiago, heading down steep steps leading to narrow alleys of one-room houses with cinder block walls and corrugated tin roofs. Fresh litter and old litter had been dropped into a partly exposed gutter in the middle of the alley running the length of the community.

"How is your Spanish?" I asked Valle.

"About 60 percent."

Philip, who was spending the year here working for Esperanza, noted his father's language weakness. "He says everything in the present tense."

Take it as a sign of a man living in the moment.

At 48, Valle has been blessed. In addition to Philip, he and Vicky have two other children, Natalia, 19, and Alina, 15. He has stayed connected to baseball by doing color commentary for the Mariners, the team with which he spent most of his 13-year big-league career. When he's off the Mariners' clock, he spends almost all his work time on behalf of Esperanza, which began paying him a salary last year.

"You start out and you want to be successful," he told me over a traditional Dominican lunch of roasted chicken, fried plantains, and rice and beans. "But once you do that, you want to do something that matters."

His own success wasn't anything he took for granted. The seventh of eight children from a family in Bay-side, Queens, he was eight years old when his father died suddenly of a heart attack while taking a shower. His mother went back to work as a nurse, taking the graveyard shift so that she'd be home for her kids before and after school. Having seen the challenge of raising three kids in a solid marriage and with financial security, Valle, a devout Christian since he was 19, is all the more astonished that his mother managed to make a stable home.

"She always told us everything would be okay," he recalled. "And it was. I don't know how she did it."

He sees glimmers of his mother's strength in the women he has encountered through Esperanza, among them Miguelina Suera, 59, who runs a

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people's lives."**

tiendacito, a little food shop, from a cinder block home with a poured concrete floor near the entrance to Hoyo de Bartola. The storefront is her kitchen window, with a display of purple eggplant, red and green peppers, and big fresh bunches of parsley—an inventory afforded by her Esperanza loan.

She stays in business even if the circumstances are not ideal. During our visit, a blind man sat outside his home with a radio on his lap. His eyes were milky and fixed skyward. As we talked to Suera, people peeked out at us, and barefoot toddlers milled about. At one point, armed men in bulletproof vests charged past. There is a gang problem here, and we were warned to leave before dark.

We drove to another Santiago neighborhood bordered by a dry riverbed that had become a repository of trash and stray dogs. Anna Mercedes Martes, 39, makes clothes and coconut candies that she supplies to four restaurants, though she's aware that to grow, she'll need to work out how to make more and find other distribution outlets, such as sundries stores.

"I would like to give you a sample, but sadly, I am sold out," she said.

"Not sadly," Pimentel exclaimed. "That's good!"

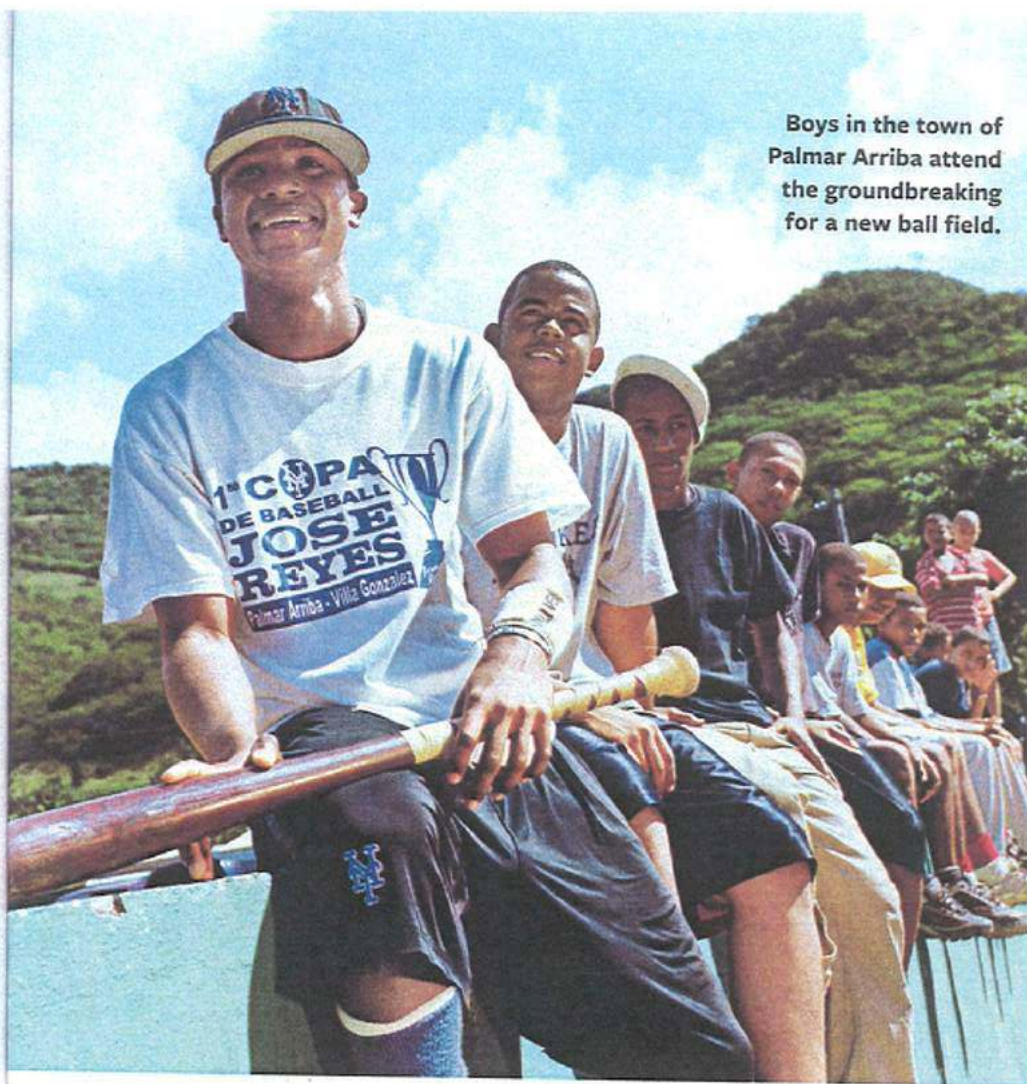
Martes was channeling earnings into a house she was building in the countryside. "I'd like to have a store," she said. "I love business! It's something I'm accomplishing with my own intelligence. All of this is the fruit of my own labor."

Big-League Help

Baseball was Valle's life's labor, and he is reliably entertaining on the topic as he describes the challenges of catching for flamethrowers like Randy Johnson. It has also furnished him with great connections and access, with a lineup of partners that includes Major League Baseball, the MLB Players Association, and Dominican major-league players including Cubs left fielder Alfonso Soriano and Mets shortstop José Reyes. Mets general manager Omar Minaya is on the Esperanza board of directors.

Back in Santo Domingo, Valle and Pimentel emerged from a talk with Dominican Pedro Martínez, delighted by the future Hall of Famer's—and the Mets organization's—commitment to getting involved.

Other players have gotten on board through an initiative Esperanza has spearheaded to fund and build baseball fields in poor communities. So



Boys in the town of Palmar Arriba attend the groundbreaking for a new ball field.

far, four are complete, and a fifth is under construction. They're great fields, but baseball is really a means to the end of community development. "The idea isn't to make better baseball players," Valle said. "It's to use this great passion and energy and mobilize people."

Esperanza secures land through long-term leases with the government, and it provides the expertise and proj-

ect management skills to construct the fields. The community donates labor to build and, later, maintain them. Any child who participates in leagues and tournaments has to be enrolled in school. The vision is for fields to be part of larger complexes that would include, say, vocational training schools.

One of the Dominican kids who made it big is Soriano, whose grant

Bienvenida Nina Santo started her restaurant with seed money from Valle's nonprofit agency.



helped build a field in his home province of San Pedro de Macorís. After the dedication ceremony, Valle turned to the perennial all-star and said, "I'm starved."

"I'll take you to get the best chicken you've ever tasted," Soriano said.

When they arrived at the tiny corner restaurant called Sazón de Mama, Valle learned that the owner, Bienvenida Nina Santo, 33, was an Esper-

anza client. She'd gone to school with Soriano and invited them to her home in the barrio behind the street-side restaurant. Compared with the clapboard shacks in the rest of the barrio, Santo's house looked like a palace, a two-story whimsical design with pink tile in the entrance and framed by red trim. Her husband had built it, but she paid it off with money earned from her business.

"You must support Esperanza," Santo told Soriano. "It is saving people's lives."

The comment, though, was more than a courteous plug for the organization, as Valle learned when Santo's youngest daughter came in and put her head sadly on her mother's shoulder. She was about the age he was when his father died.

"It's okay, it's okay," she said. "Everything is going to be okay."

Valle was reminded of his own mother and felt a reverberation through time on hearing that Santo's husband had died, leaving four children and a pile of high-interest debt.

The loan from Esperanza kept her going.

Today, Santo's restaurant generates

as much as \$300 a week in profits, an impressive income in the Dominican Republic, and her three brothers have followed her example by opening their own branches of Sazón de Mama. Santo's daughters are articulate and ambitious. Fifteen-year-old Carina wants to be a child psychologist; 14-year-old Daniela, a lawyer; and nine-year-old Clara, a physician. Given their mother's example, it's not hard to imagine they'll achieve their dreams.

"I know we're going to be okay," she told Valle, "because I have the business. Without the help we received from you, I don't know where we would have been."



See the faces of Esperanza's success in our slide show and read about one of the top triumphs at readersdigest.com/esperanza.

MY SON THE MAN

Suddenly his shoulders get a
lot wider,
the way Houdini would expand
his body
while people were putting him in
chains. It seems
no time since I would help him to
put on his sleeper,
guide his calves into the gold
interior,
zip him up and toss him up and
catch his weight. I cannot imagine
him
no longer a child, and I know I
must get ready,

get over my fear of men now
my son
is going to be one. This was not
what I had in mind when he
pressed up through me like a
sealed trunk through the ice of
the Hudson,
snapped the padlock, unsnaked the
chains,
and appeared in my arms. Now he
looks at me
the way Houdini studied a box
to learn the way out, then smiled
and let himself be manacled.

Sharon Olds

FROM THE WELLSpring BY SHARON OLDS (KNOPF, 1996). TO READ MORE POETRY, GO TO POETRYFOUNDATION.ORG.