

Worksheet 3: Informational text

Student Name _____ Date _____

“Violence against Women and the Example of the Mirabal Sisters”

Delivered by Minou Tavárez Mirabal, a Representative to the Dominican Chamber of Deputies and daughter of Minerva Mirabal, November 6, 2006, at Middlebury College

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1. Firstly, let me express thanks for this opportunity to come to Middlebury College and share with you some of the road that has been covered by Dominican women in building their political participation and in combating violence against women. Never has the discussion of these issues been more relevant than it is today.
2. Indigenous Taina women would commit group suicide in order to avoid bearing children for the Spanish conquistadores, the first expression of political participation known to the history of the island which my country, the Dominican Republic, shares with Haiti. No one, no historian, takes note of it as such—one more example of what Luis Vitale, referring to women, described as “the invisible half of history.” From that time down to the present, it is clear that the changes our country has gone through have not been a product of the actions of men alone, but most of the leading female figures who acted alongside them are nearly faceless women, their visage erased by time, virtually buried by history. One of the tasks that remain before us is that of rescuing and making visible the social and political initiative shown by those women, saving from oblivion their achievements, tragedies, contributions and, above all, highlighting their example, to guide and inspire us as we continue in their footsteps.
3. Violence against women has significantly changed the public agenda. For a long time, the public agenda of Dominican women revolved around political participation understood as a space for the building of democratic processes, through parties, parliaments, town halls and the Executive. That perspective, as in many other countries, led to advancing laws to grant women a share or quota in the various fora of national politics, and to positive initiatives ensuring a prominent position on the electoral lists of our political parties. Where democracy prevails, and in countries that are embarking upon a process of transition to democracy, participation is a central focus of the political dynamic.
4. This brings us to the difficulty that women face in achieving effective participation. The need to bring about “equal opportunity for women in political life” also brought other themes to the foreground, such as empowerment of women and the need for greater leadership in decision-making. Today, women legislators and party leaders are demanding more power for women, with a view to building a more just society and a more complete democracy. Unfortunately, the representation gap in our country can be seen not only in popularly elected positions but also, and chiefly, in the platforms of political parties and of public policies—for political equality remains out of reach without formal machinery for representation and without women forging alliances to change a social system dominated by male values.

Courage “*In the Time of the Butterflies*”: A Common Core Exemplar

5. However, despite the achievements, the growth of gender violence and intra-family violence has taken on such proportions that it has come into the foreground in the public agenda of government institutions, congresses and, in some cases, political parties, taking the form of a demand for more resolute decisions and actions. That situation is not peculiar to the Dominican Republic or to our hemisphere, and it has long since ceased to be a private matter. Nor could it be private when figures from the office of the National Prosecutor and from the press show that in the Dominican Republic during the last six years nearly 911 women of various ages have lost their lives in “femicides” committed—in the name of love!—by husbands, fiancés and live-in boyfriends. And so far this year nearly 8,000 women have reported cases of intra-family violence (bear in mind that we are talking about a country with a population of under 10 million). Similarly, figures from the National Police show that intra-family violence affects six out of every ten Dominican homes. According to the same source, a woman is raped every five and a half hours and at least 40% of Dominican boys and girls have suffered some form of physical, psychological, sexual, or multiple abuse in the home context. Given the under-reporting of cases that prevails in the large majority of public institutions in the Dominican Republic, the numbers are necessarily higher.
6. In the national legislative arena the passage of Law 24-97, which penalizes violence against women and domestic or intra-family violence, constituted a far-reaching step, given that this is a penal law, contemplates some measures of orders of protection for abused women, is more enforceable in its content, and includes measures aimed at changing aggressive behavior. (Look out for the New Penal Code and its threats!) A cardinal goal for Dominican society, and, more specifically for women legislators in the Dominican Congress, is to tackle putting an end to gender violence. Many initiatives are being pursued along these lines, from draft laws and resolutions aimed at implementing campaigns against violence to the creation of mechanisms supporting compliance with Law 24-97 and the undertakings assumed in the Convention of Belem do Pará, to fostering an even stronger commitment to prevention in society as a whole. This is an indispensable task, calling for involvement by all public and private institutions (from schools to the media) with a view to eradicating any attitude, message or practice which offers a justification for gender violence.
7. ...But the organizers of this event have asked me to touch on the history of the Mirabal sisters, whose example rallies the women of the world to the struggle to eradicate gender violence every November 25th, the date on which they were murdered. Minerva, Patria, and Maria Teresa, the daughters of a prosperous peasant family of Cibao, the central region of my country, are emblematic figures in the struggle of Dominican women to achieve their rights to political participation and the construction of democracy. They paid with their lives to pave the way for us Dominican women and men living in a democratic regime today.
8. Born between the 1930s and 1940s, they had a happy childhood and adolescence, surrounded by material wellbeing and the love of their mother and father. At a time when it was unusual, and in a place where it was unusual, they had a primary and secondary education and two of them—Minerva and Maria Teresa—managed to overcome parental resistance and went on to university studies. From a very early age, Minerva, my mother, the third of the four sisters, distinguished herself by her great social and artistic sensibility and leadership qualities, which very soon led her to a political awareness and to forging bonds of friendship with other young people opposed to the regime, in the oppressive environment of the long Trujillo dictatorship of 31 years, probably the bloodiest our region has endured.

Courage “*In the Time of the Butterflies*”: A Common Core Exemplar

9. An incident which has become something of a legend occurred in July of 1949, when she attended a party with her father and Trujillo noticed her for the first time, attracted by her presence and her beauty. Less than three months later, in October, the family was invited to another party in honor of Trujillo and her father was expressly asked to bring Minerva. There, Trujillo tried to seduce her, which she resisted, openly taking a political stand—by coming to the defense of an opposition figure—which would lead her to jails, tortures, house arrest and ultimately to her death together with her sisters Patria and Maria Teresa.
10. It was she who proposed to a group of friends and relatives to form a national political-military group to confront the regime. The goal: to overthrow the dictatorship and introduce a democratic government. With another woman (Dulce Maria Tejada Gómez) and 12 men, she took part in the founding meeting of the 14th of June Political Movement. Although she was not elected to the leadership, her proposal to give ideological support to the organization in the Manifesto of the Movement of National Liberation, spearheaded by a failed invasion in June 1959, was taken on by the group. Oral accounts speak of the great political and intellectual maturity of Minerva, as well as the organizational ability she showed at meetings and in the formation of the group.
11. The regime soon learned of the existence of this organization and Minerva, together with her sister Maria Teresa, who was also a member of the 14th of June Political Movement, was jailed once again. But they were not the only ones jailed. Also confined to the tyrant’s dungeons were the husbands of the three sisters and one of Patria’s sons, as well as thousands of men and women who were part of this national opposition movement that had spread through the country’s major provinces. Many were murdered, some after horrible tortures.
12. Pressures from the international community and domestically from the Catholic Church (which until then had been cornerstones of the dictatorship) led to the release of many political prisoners. History tells of the tyrant’s wrath upon hearing reports that Minerva, on the two occasions when she was released, immediately turned to reorganizing the opposition movement. “The only problems my government has,” he went so far as to say publicly, “are the Church and Minerva Mirabal.” Their fate was already sealed. Six months after the Mirabal sisters were beaten to death, and to a great extent motivated by the horror of that unprecedented crime, on May 30th, 1961, a group of Dominicans resolutely put Trujillo to death and the process of building Dominican democracy then began.
13. ...I am often asked why, in the 1940s and 1950s, Minerva and her sisters took on roles of social and political leadership in the midst of a traditional society where the collective imagination envisaged women as confined to domestic roles. Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that they came from a family comprised mainly of women, which made it possible for them to assume those roles that were unconventional for the time. After years of failed attempts, Minerva managed to overcome fear and family resistance and went to study at the university in 1952, with me already born and my brother on the way. She earned a Doctor of Laws degree (Summa cum Laude) but, besieged by the regime, was never permitted to practice her profession. At the University she forged new and important relationships with leading members of the anti-Trujillo opposition, and followed the progress of struggles for liberation in the region by international radio, which she and her sisters would listen to in secret. A woman of great vitality, in addition to all of these leadership activities and to cultivating her mind and political skills, she would sculpt, write poetry, recite, and was a voracious reader. She was also fond of sewing, embroidery, and gardening. This woman of great integrity and political maturity played an

Courage “*In the Time of the Butterflies*”: A Common Core Exemplar

important role in shaping the 14th of June Political Movement and its ideology in 1959, together with a group of men and another woman.

14. However, it fell to my father, another great hero of Dominican democracy, to be the president of that movement. Some accounts say that she was the person who showed the most leadership, firmness, organizational ability and political acumen to guide the group, but at that time, and perhaps today, it was inconceivable for a political movement made up mostly of men to be led by a woman. I think that even today we Dominican women owe a debt to Minerva Mirabal: to research and rescue from oblivion her important leadership as a forerunner in the building of a new political era for the Dominican Republic, directed towards the building of our democracy. Her leading role in the fight against the Trujillo dictatorship is acknowledged by one of her most rabid enemies and probably the man who directly plotted the murder of Minerva and her sisters: Johnny Abbes García, Director of the dreaded Military Intelligence Service, who refers to Minerva in his memoir *Trujillo and I* as follows:

“...It was Minerva Mirabal who had sown the seeds of sedition in her family and had probably infected her husband, Dr. Manuel Tavárez Justo ... sick with left-wing radicalism, which over time brought death to her and tragedy upon her family.”

15. Minerva, Maria Teresa, Patria, the Mirabal sisters, have become symbols for the world, since the feminist movement in Latin America began in 1981 and then a United Nations resolution in 1999 declared November 25th the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women in honor of these three Dominican heroines.
16. In conclusion, a few final words are called for about the long struggle of Dominican women. It has taken us many years to get to the point we have reached today. Women’s organizations have played a primary role in putting gender issues on our country’s public agenda. The process of challenges, mobilizations, legislative proposals and lobbying for their adoption has been long but, above all, I want especially to emphasize that it has been the fruit of our ability to seek consensus, to develop strategies and set priorities and timetables, to agree with each other over and above partisan factions or controversies and, step by step, often having to take a step back, to gain access for more women to the spaces where the decisions that change political life are taken.
17. Much remains to be done but we have also achieved a great deal. Along that journey, Minerva, Patria and Maria Teresa have been with us, giving legitimacy to our fight. And here in this setting, together with you, our friends, we wish once again to raise our voice and say that Minerva lives, that the Mirabal sisters live, no longer just in the Dominican Republic but here among you, today and every time their example ceases to be invisible and serves to repudiate the violence that our societies have visited upon women, guiding us along the path towards building a culture of peace in our countries of Latin America and the world. And at occasions like this one which brings us together today, it is a consolation to me to think that my mother Minerva was not wrong when she would hear warnings about how dangerous it was to stand up to Rafael Leonidas Trujillo and would always reply with these same words: “...If they kill me, I shall reach my arms out of the grave and I shall be stronger.”