

## People in the Film



### Dr. Luther Castillo

Garifuna student  
at the Latin American Medical School\*  
Honduras

#### WHERE IS HE NOW?

Since graduating from the Latin American Medical School in August 2005, Dr Luther Castillo has been collaborating with other graduates, non-governmental partners, labor leaders, community members, and international and local volunteers to finalize the construction and equipping of the Ciriboya Community Hospital in the Honduran Mosquitia (see [Innovative Project Brings Permanent Medical Services to Honduran Mosquitia](#)). This community-based initiative, addressing the specific health needs of the Garifunas, represents the first sustainable source of care for the 18,000 people living in Ironia Municipality, Dr Castillo's home region.

In 2006, Dr Castillo began his residency in family medicine in Honduras. In November of that same year, he was named "Honduran Doctor of the Year" by Rotary International's Tegucigalpa chapter.

#### UNPUBLISHED INTERVIEW EXCERPTS FROM ¡SALUD! December 2004

##### On medical services in Garifuna communities when Luther was a child:

During my childhood, there were no medical services of any kind in my community – just those provided by people who knew a little bit about natural medicine and delivering babies. I still remember that when my little brothers were born, it was the midwives who took care of everything. Back then, when someone got sick in the community, you had to transport them to another community – either Sangrelaya or Palacios. In Palacios, generally there was a health care center which might have a doctor doing his social service year, or a nurse. In any case, someone getting sick in our community translated into transporting the patient, with all the dangers that implied.

##### On medical services in Honduras today:

What do we do now? Fortunately, we now have a health center in my community. There we have a Cuban doctor who's working in the community full-time. That's one of the best guarantees the community has...a bit more access to health care services thanks to the health care centers and the presence of Cuban doctors. So, now medical care is closer to people. They don't have to walk all the way to Sangrelaya...

##### On his decision to become a doctor and study in Cuba:



From the very beginning I had my own ideas about what I was going to do, but I didn't really think about studying medicine. Because there's always the question: "How am I going to study medicine? I have to move to the capital. There's only one school of medicine in the whole country." While living in my

community, I took courses with some people who worked with natural medicine. I got very interested in it and also in the contradiction between the [social service] doctors that arrived there and people in the community [who were] strongly attached to the use of natural medicine. They didn't see eye to eye...

I think we have to take advantage of any opportunity to study that arises for us – people with limited resources. I thank God for this opportunity to study medicine and for the opportunity to have such a humanistic profession...to study medicine in Cuba, becoming a doctor in the service of the community and in the service of poor people.

#### **On barriers to medical education:**

I tried to study medicine in Honduras. I registered at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras, but I couldn't continue because my family just couldn't afford it...the expenses, including the books themselves. And I had to make a choice – that is, not to renounce the dream, but to look for something else to study, before this opportunity to study in Cuba appeared.

#### **On the Latin American Medical School scholarship process:**

My first contact with the Cuban doctors was after [Hurricane] Mitch. A [non-profit] organization was putting together programs to train people about food distribution...but three days after that, the scholarship to go to Cuba appeared. In those meetings, we met the Cuban doctors...They told me about this opportunity, and I didn't think twice. I thought this was not only a unique opportunity but also one we should take advantage of. They told me, "If you want to take the (entrance) exam, get your documents together." So that's what I did.

I had to go to [the town of] Ceiba to take the exam. Overland, it took six or seven hours to get there. Cars had no access to my community, so we had to walk to another one, about eight and a half hours away. From there, we took a car to Ceiba. The distance itself was a barrier for some of the young people who wanted to take the entrance exam: if you had a job in the community, it was difficult to leave. "No, I can't leave my job to go after such an uncertainty as a scholarship."

#### **On Cuban doctors in Honduras:**

They were welcomed in our communities because of the way they treated people. That's something people always talked about – I remember my grandmother used to tell me, "I went to see the Cuban doctors, and they treated me without repugnance." It was a phrase that stuck in my mind. How could you treat an elderly person with repugnance? But that's how she had felt, before the Cuban doctors came along.

#### **On Honduras Health Project and collaborating with Honduran doctors:**

As students, we put together a project called Honduras Health, and we went to Honduras to work. First we went to a health center to do an evaluation of the health situation in the communities to identify some of the problems we could work on during our vacation. When the dengue fever outbreak occurred, Ministry (of Health) officials asked if we were willing to join the fight against the epidemic...We did, working side-by-side with the Cuban doctors: fumigating, educating, providing care under their guidance.



In the health center where we were working, there were two Honduran doctors working with us. A group of students from the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras (UNAH) joined the campaign too, working with us for a week, fumigating and educating house-to-house, really impressive. So, we did this together: the Honduran students in Cuba and students from the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras. I think it was very positive, and helped us all realize how much the country needs each one of us.

\*Luther is now Dr Castillo, having graduated in 2005, in the Latina American Medical School's first commencement. He is now practicing and building a hospital for Garifuna communities on the Honduran coast. [Click for more information on this project.](#)

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