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Date: 6/23/2006 9:14:14 PM
Subject: News: Venezuela to the Rescue -Shepherd Express 6-22-06; pics & report en espanol of Ambassador visit to Milw.; letters to MJS editor re last week's article

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- 1) Venezuela to the Rescue? 6-22-06 Shepherd Express article
- 2) 6-23-06 Letters to MJS Editor re Venezuela, link to original article
- 3) Pictures and report (en espanol) of Ambassador's visit to Milwaukee and Midwest, from the Consulate in Chicago

From Shepherd Express, 6-22-06, pg. 11:

Venezuela to the Rescue?
Milwaukeeans explore a sister-city relationship and closer ties

By Evan Rytlewski
Shepherd Express
June 22, 2006

When Babette Grunow visited Venezuela two years ago, she saw a very different country from the one portrayed in American newspapers and on television.

"We saw protests being held against the government and [the citizens] weren't being repressed," she recalls. "But if you listen to our government talk about Venezuela, they make it sound like it's a dictatorship. I didn't see that. I saw a government that was trying to do things for people that basically hadn't been done for years.

Impressed by how Hugo Chavez's administration was addressing healthcare, poverty, and literacy, earlier this year Grunow joined the Milwaukee Bolivarian Circle, a group founded by Milwaukee residents who had also visited Venezuela and shared experiences similar to Grunow's. The group seeks to educate Milwaukee about Venezuela's democratic socialist government, and is rallying support for Ald. Mike McGee Jr.'s proposal to adopt Carora, a progressive Venezuelan town with a strong dairy industry, as a sister city.

McGee suggested in a sister-city partnership last February in a letter he sent to President Chavez, and outspoken enemy of the Bush administration criticized for his close ties to Iran and Cuba and for alleged human rights violations.

Although Chavez has engaged Bush in an increasingly tense war of words and has publicly militarized Venezuela, he has also launched a goodwill campaign toward the United States, providing discounted heating oil to eight states and offering free eye surgery to low-income patients in Chicago who are willing to go to Venezuela for their operations.

Diplomats Make Their Case

Last Thursday, Venezuelan Ambassador Bernardo Alvarez and Venezuelan Consul General Martin Sanchez visited Milwaukee to discuss the sister-city partnership and announce their intentions to bring those oil and eye-surgery programs to Milwaukee.

Mayor Tom Barrett said the city still has to research the logistics of those programs, but he was keeping an open mind.

"My view is, if this is something that would help low-income people have a better standard of living, it'd be something I'm all in favor of," he said.

Barrett said he believed that employing these programs would not undermine the federal government.

"There are strange relationships between the leader of Venezuela and the United States, but [Venezuela's government wants] to create better relationships," he said. "I don't see this as something that would disrupt the foreign affairs of the United States, and the fact that they're working on [the heating-oil program]... leads me to tentatively conclude there wouldn't be any problems."

Although the mayor did not take a stance on the Carora sister-city proposal, which is up to the Common Council to approve, he said in general he supports adopting sister cities.

Ald. Michael Murphy said he will back the sister-city proposal, even though he doesn't share the same assessment of Venezuela's government as McGee, who expressed admiration and support for Chavez in his February correspondence. The proposal will likely be controversial, Murphy explained, since Venezuela is perceived as an enemy by some, and that just having McGee's name on the proposal makes it "a lightning rod."

"I'm sure I'll be criticized for [supporting] it, but I feel very comfortable explaining to people why its important," Murphy said. "Venezuela is, I believe, our third-largest energy partner in terms of supplying oil, but currently we have very poor relations with this country. Its imperative that we take the opportunity to get to know each other."

Murphy said the relationship would improve our understanding of an increasingly influential country, even if it is controversial.

"You don't always have to have sister-city relationships with the countries you have good relationships with," he said. "It's probably more important to have them with countries you have bad relationship's with."

What's your take? Write: editor@shepherd-express.com

Also from Shepherd Express, 6-22-06, pg. 11:

Hugo Chavez

Although the American media often equate Hugo Chavez to Fidel Castro, unlike the Cuban president, the Venezuelan president was democratically elected.

-In 1992, Chavez, a career military officer, rose to prominence after attempting a coup against then-President Carlos Andres Perez.

-With strong support from the lower class, Chavez was elected president in 1998 with 56% of the vote.

- He won re-election in 2000 with 60% of the vote.

- In 2002, Chavez was removed from office for two days during a brief, failed military coup that most of the world believes was supported by the Bush administration. The United States initially supported the coup plotters until the people of Venezuela restored their democratically elected president Chavez to power. After the coup failed, the Bush administration then condemned it.

- In 2004, Chavez survived a recall effort with 59% of the popular vote. Although the losers in the election alleged voter fraud, the Carter Center certified the election results.

Letters to the Editor on Venezuela, Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel 6-23-06:

VENEZUELA

Don't turn down offer

My response to the June 18 editorial "Slow leadership on energy" is how unfortunate the Editorial Board thinks us so ignorant. It dismissed Venezuela's offer of free eye surgery and discounted heating oil to Milwaukee's poor as grand self-serving gestures designed primarily to enhance Hugo Chavez's political currency in an election year.

What the board is forgetting is that the election is in Venezuela and that we live in the United States. By most reports, the state of health care in this country is shameful. The offer of free cataract surgery is nothing to scoff at. Similarly, in this northern city, the offer of heating assistance is deeply appreciated.

Does the Editorial Board realize how long the lines are for people waiting to sign up for assistance from this limited fund and how many deserving residents can't get it?

OK, Chavez seized two oil fields from private businesses, but the Venezuelan congress agreed on new terms of operation by foreign oil companies that 60% of their profits have to be shared with the state-owned oil company.

Who cares? The poor - the majority of Venezuelans - do. And they've seen their lives improve steadily. Don't expect us to toe the Journal Sentinel party line and turn up our noses at a genuine offer of help.

Paul Seifert

Milwaukee

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Yes to positive relationship

Recently, while in Venezuela on international business, I saw firsthand the work the Chavez government - imagine, a democratically elected president with an approval rating above 70% - is doing in attacking illiteracy, hunger and poverty.

Dramatic improvement is possible when oil profits from Citgo, a subsidiary of the state oil firm Petroleos de Venezuela SA, are directed to programs of social welfare.

I met an elderly Venezuelan woman who was proud to own her first pair of reading glasses. She had never needed them before, because she didn't know how to read. But in this new era of attention to literacy, she has learned to read - a striking example of how attention to the needs of the poor has engaged her in this globalizing world.

Through Milwaukee's sister-city initiative, the Venezuelan ambassador and the chief of the Venezuelan consulate in Chicago visited with Mayor Tom Barrett and the people of Milwaukee. Now, plans are under way to advance the idea of a sister-city relationship with the city of Carora in Lara State, Venezuela.

This positive relationship between the people of Venezuela and the people of Milwaukee is truly important, and it is encouraging to see organizations such as the Bolivarian Circle of Milwaukee developing a dialogue, people to people.

Mike Helbick
Milwaukee

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A letter makes a difference

The June 16 Journal Sentinel contained an article concerning Venezuela possibly giving assistance to poor people in Milwaukee. Apparently, a letter from Milwaukee Ald. Michael McGee started the ball rolling.

He deserves a pat on the back and the sincere thanks of the citizens of Milwaukee!

Ed Ratliff
Wauwatosa

Click below for last week's Journal Sentinel story:
Venezuela bypasses Bush, offers help here
(from 6-16-06 Metro section front page)
<http://www.jsonline.com/story/index.aspx?id=436487>

For a report in spanish on the Ambassador's visit to Milwaukee,
including pictures, visit
<http://chicago.embavenez-us.org/>

Milwaukee pics:

Ambassador Alvarez with Mayor Barrett
[http://www.embavenez-us.org/nmimage.php?z=/uploaded_pics/2788_4.jpg&width=640&
height=480&title=](http://www.embavenez-us.org/nmimage.php?z=/uploaded_pics/2788_4.jpg&width=640&height=480&title=)

Ambassador Alvarez at the United Community Center:
[http://www.embavenez-us.org/nmimage.php?z=/uploaded_pics/2788_5.jpg&width=576&
height=432&title=](http://www.embavenez-us.org/nmimage.php?z=/uploaded_pics/2788_5.jpg&width=576&height=432&title=)

Ambassador interviewed on Telemundo:
[http://www.embavenez-us.org/nmimage.php?z=/uploaded_pics/2788_9.jpg&width=576&
height=432&title=](http://www.embavenez-us.org/nmimage.php?z=/uploaded_pics/2788_9.jpg&width=576&height=432&title=)

Consul General Martin Sanchez speaks at UWM:
[http://www.embavenez-us.org/nmimage.php?z=/uploaded_pics/2788_11.jpg&width=640
&height=480&title=](http://www.embavenez-us.org/nmimage.php?z=/uploaded_pics/2788_11.jpg&width=640&height=480&title=)

Ambassador Alvarez in City Hall with Milwaukee Aldermen:
[http://www.embavenez-us.org/nmimage.php?z=/uploaded_pics/2788_8.jpg&width=576&
height=432&title=](http://www.embavenez-us.org/nmimage.php?z=/uploaded_pics/2788_8.jpg&width=576&height=432&title=)

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