**Student seeks unified world through poses**

ADRIANA RODRIGUEZ  
Lifet Editor

When thinking of ways to unify her world, Sara Conklin’s mind kept returning to the theme of happiness. Conklin, a 21-year-old FIU student, had been assigned the world unity task as a project in her course. She was to use a photo she took while vacationing with her family in New York City to create a template for the visual expression of happiness. The pose was basic: “and a bit goofy,” she said, but since then, the activity in the picture has become known as “The Sara Pose.”

It has become very popular on the web as people all over replicate her pose, which is, in fact, quite simple: the subject of the photo stands in front of any landmark, back turned to the camera and arms stretched out in the air as if rejoicing.

“Anybody, anywhere in the world who speaks any language can look at that picture and just see that the person is sublimely happy,” Conklin said. “That person is so happy in that moment in time that they just want to freeze it. You don’t even have to see their face or their smile to know it.”

After the high school class assignment, the pose followed her through all her major high school events, including prom and graduation. The pose coined the name “The Sara Pose” after Conklin’s friend picked up on her mission to unite the world and wanted to share in the activity. It all started with a Facebook album. Conklin created an album on the social media site chronicling her travels throughout her life where she got the chance to document the pose. The pose wasn’t just about a beautiful background to Conklin, it was about the significance of time and place. Friends would take a photo of them doing the pose and then tag Conklin’s name. Conklin would then take the photo and add it to her own album.

“The pose is so much more than a pretty background,” she said. “Wherever you take that picture, it was special because it was in front of Mt. Kilimanjaro. It doesn’t have to be in front of the Eiffel Tower. It could be anywhere as long as it’s meaningful to the person in the picture.”

After high school, Conklin attended Boston University, where she studied directing in the university’s fine arts program. As an elective, she enrolled in a course in African Studies, focusing on a country she always wanted to learn more about.

“Ever since I was a little kid I wanted to go to Africa. I don’t know why,” she said. “I grew up in a community that didn’t teach me anything about Africa. It was just that one place I’ve always wanted to go to.”

Conklin got her first chance to visit Africa on an internship when she was just a sophomore and the experience changed her.

The internship was with an organization called Support for International Change that takes volunteers to Tanzania to live in rural villages to educate people on HIV/AIDS prevention and to run mobile testing centers. The trip also gave her the opportunity to give back.

“We knew Sara was set out to help and care for others from an early age,” said Cheryl Conklin, Conklin’s mother. She also wasn’t surprised when Conklin decided to travel with the humanitarian group.

Conklin says she learned more from the villagers than she could have imagined teaching them. She even learned Swahili.

“We were living like real Tanzanians. It was what it was. I had to walk 10 minutes in the morning to get my water and then boil it. I loved it,” Conklin said.

POSING, page 5

**Student demonstrates dedication, discipline in the ring**

CHRISTINA FLORES  
Contributing Writer

The arena erupted with cheers as the Brazilian-born super middleweight boxer defeats his opponent in a unanimous decision at a crowded gym in Sao Paulo.

It was the 14th win for Michael Oliveira, who has dubbed himself “The Chairman of the Board.”

The 20-year-old physical therapy major at Florida International University has 21 knockouts and no losses. His win last Friday night was to uncontested Abel Adiel of Argentina, earning Oliveira the Interim WBC Latino super middleweight title.

With a glove size of 10 ounces, Oliveira is a force in the ring. Born in Sao Paulo, Brazil, Oliveira’s lifelong passion and desire is to follow in the footsteps of his father and grandfather in becoming a professional boxer.

“My grandpa was a boxer,” Oliveira said. “He and I would sit on his couch and watch the videotaped matches he had been in. I became obsessed. I started to love the sport and started to see myself in the ring more and more.”

His late grandfather, Joao Oliveira, was an amateur boxer in the military in Brazil. Oliveira’s brief amateur career began at the age of 17 and evolved into a profession within a year.

He attributes his success to his dedication and discipline. His daily workout routine consists of 6-hour days, including running, cardio, and strength training.

BOXING, page 2

**Science Café course now offered by Biology Department**

ANALIA FIESTAS  
Staff Writer

Attempting to attract non-science majors to the world of science, the Biology Café Department will now be offering a Science Café course.

Headed by Ph.D. candidate Anya Goldina, this course is part of a new program within the Biology Department called “Quantifying Biology In the Classroom.” The QBIC takes multiple fields, such as biology, chemistry, physics, English and math, integrating them so that students can see how all these fields connect and have relevance to each other,” said Goldina.

Goldina feels that science is becoming more specialized with certain scientific terms that utilize complex interpretations of published findings. Scientific findings that have strong impacts on governmental policies, such as healthcare and energy bills, are often too difficult to interpret by the public. These findings can easily be misinterpreted, and the University’s Biology Department hopes that this new course can ease this confusion.

“Science Cafés” have been implemented in many countries such as England, Scotland, United States, Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, New Zealand, Japan, Zambia and the Philippines.

“Science Café aims to lessen the gap in the public’s understanding of science and scientific research, and develop a culture of wanting to engage the non-scientist in talking about science with passion,” said Goldina.

As part of the QBIC program at the University, Dr. Ophelia Weeks and Dr. Martin Tracey, both professors in the Department of Biological Science, have developed a Science Café course.

“Dr. Ophelia Weeks was thinking of ways that she could challenge the science-major seniors to do something different and exciting with the material that they had been learning through their college career. This is how she came up with the Science Café idea,” said Goldina.
WEIRD NEWS

‘OMG,’ and ‘LOL’ added to the dictionary

It’s difficult to avoid –3, OMG, and LOL slip into our text messages and emails, but at least we can now excuse that by pointing out that these are in fact terms acknowledged by the authorities of the English language.

The experts at Oxford Dictionaries Online explain that the initialisms added to the dictionary are “ noteworthy” and even happen to be “found outside of electronic contexts.” How could they not add initialisms and words like this to the dictionary: la-la land, OMGWTF, LMAO, and wassup? That’s ‘wassup’ with this month’s modifications of the Oxford English Dictionary. Let’s hope that next month brings us definitions for OMGWTF, LMAO, and KIT.

Man dies trying to revive dead wife

A man who called 911 to report that his wife had collapsed apparently suffered a heart attack and died as he was trying to revive her, authorities say.

The Clallam County sheriff’s office said when deputies and medics arrived eight minutes later on Wednesday night at the home near Joyce, they found the man slumped over her body. He apparently had been attempting CPR.

The deaths appear to be from natural causes and no crime is suspected, the Peninsula Daily News reported.

Sgt. John Keegan called the incident strange but said, “I think if you’re trying CPR and the man slumped over her body. He apparently had been attempting CPR.

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MOVING FORWARD

Rojas blast sparks FIU in win

MALCOM SHIELDS
Staff Writer

After splitting the first two games in the weekend series against the Mean Green, the Golden Panthers jumped out to an early lead against North Texas and cruised to an 8-3 victory on March 27.

The Mean Green scored first in the bottom of the second inning. North Texas had runners on first and third with one out. Renee Bromley who reached base on a single stole second base. Short stop Kayla Burri allowed the runner from third base to score on an error, which gave North Texas a 1-0 lead.

The Golden Panthers took the lead back in the top of the third inning. With two outs, Ashley McClain was hit by a pitch and was followed by sophomore Bri Rojas, who crushed a two-run home run into center field on the first pitch she saw to give the Golden Panthers a 2-1 lead.

The Golden Panthers (17-15, 5-1 SBC) continued the run in the inning for the Golden Panthers. After recording an out on a fielder’s choice, Cantler was called for an illegal pitch, which allowed a run to score. A sac fly by fly by Casals to center field scored the second run in the inning for the Golden Panthers.

The Golden Panthers added another run in the sixth inning putting two more runners on with two outs. On a 0-2 pitch, Jessy Alfonso singled to right field scoring a run to extend the lead to 3-1. Beth Peller and McClain picked up RBI singles afterwards to push the lead to 5-1.

North Texas (14-17, 2-7 SBC) pitcher Brittany Simmons had a rough outing and after giving up a single to Burri in the fifth inning she was pulled. Simmons went four innings, surrendering seven hits and five earned runs and earned the loss.

Mallory Cantler entered the game to pitch and FIU’s Jenny Welch doubled to right field and walked the next batter to load the bases.

After recording an out on a fielder’s choice, Cantler was called for an illegal pitch, which allowed a run to score. A sac fly by fly by Casals to center field scored the second run in the inning for the Golden Panthers.

The Eagles are led offensively by Platt, Mariah Fernandez and Britney Garabedian. Platt’s .389 batting average and .666 slugging percentage leads the Eagles. Fernandez leads the Eagles with 19 RBIs. Garabedian leads the Eagles with 7 home runs.

In the circle, McDaniels anchors the pitching staff for coach David Deavers. McDaniels has an 8-8 record with a solid 1.73 ERA in 101.1 innings pitched this season. Her 233 opposing batting average leads the Eagles. Breaux and Sullivan round out the pitching staff for the Eagles. Sullivan is 3-3 with a 2.45 ERA. Breaux has a 6-5 record with a 3.61 ERA.

Last Meeting

The Golden Panthers are 3-3 in the last six meetings against Florida Gulf Coast. Last season, FIU defeated the Eagles in two of the three games. The last time the Golden Panthers faced off against the Eagles in Fort Myers was in 2009. The Eagles have "potential for improvement, but were getting along great as a team right now."
Bermudez knocks in game-winning run in extra innings

In a game that came down to the final at bat, the Golden Panthers took on the Western Kentucky Hilltoppers. The game had its ups and downs for both teams but in the end, Pablo Bermudez’s tenth inning single was the difference as the Golden Panthers edged WKU 9-8.

The Panthers had their struggles early on, starting out down 5-0, but when in came to crunch time, the bats came to life. After Kes Carter led off the bottom of the inning, Mike Martinez allowed all season long. McVay came on to pick up a pitching change for the Panthers. It was the first run that McVay has allowed all season long. The FIU bats came to life in the bottom of the inning, Mike Martinez and TJ Shantz led off with back-to-back singles. Then Jose Behar homered to deep left to tie game at 6. "That was the first time all year [Behar] hasn’t hit 9th in the lineup. I’m glad he hit in that spot today,” Thomas said jokingly.

Bermudez knew he would have to come up big. "I knew I was the sixth batter, so I knew that if we were going to win or tie the game, I would have to come up big,” Bermudez said. “I was mentally prepared and ready to handle that situation.”

In FIU’s thrilling 9-8 victory over Western Kentucky on March 27, “This is our biggest win of the year,” Coach Thomas said. “This was bigger than our win out at Texas A&M. This is the most proud of the team I have been all year long.”

Eagles won both games of doubleheader last season

FGCU, page 3

won both games of a double-header. Last year, Kayla Burri, Ashley McClain and Briie Rojas, had success offensively for the Golden Panthers against Florida Gulf Coast. Burri went 5-for-11 with four RBI in three games against the Eagles. McClain went 5-for-10, while Rojas went 4-for-11 against the Eagles.

Pitcher Jenn Gniadek struggled against the Eagles. In her lone start she went 2.2 innings, giving up seven earned runs in the loss. McClain also saw time against the Eagles. She pitched two scoreless innings in her appearance. Courtney Platt paced the Eagles at the plate last year against the Golden Panthers. Platt went 3-for-7 with three RBI against FIU. In the circle, Keiki Breaux, Stephanie Sullivan, and Cathearine McDaniel all made appearances against the Golden Panthers last year. Breaux fared well against FIU, pitching six innings while giving up only two earned runs in a victory.

In a GROOVE

Burri extended her hit streak to 11 games by going 1-for-3 in the series finale against North Texas. She is currently hitting .323 on the season. McClain continues to have a great season at the plate. She is hitting .430 with 5 home runs and 31 RBI. Pitchers Mariah Dawson and Gniadek have been stingy against conference opponents early on. Gniadek has a 1.22 ERA and a 2-1 record, while Dawson has a 1.75 ERA and a 2-0 record in conference play.

Offensive power propels road win

when McClain collected her second RBI on the day on a sac fly that scored Peller, who went 3-for-5 in the game, from third base.

Down six runs, the Mean Green mounted one last push to tie the game in the bottom of the seventh inning.

Lesley Hirsch led off the inning by hitting a double to right center field. But after a walk to Cantler, the Golden Panthers recorded the first out of the inning on a fielder’s choice at third base.

Lisa Johnson loaded the bases on a single to center. A groundball to Burri completed the force out at second base, allowing a run to score from third base.

The game ended on a flyout by Courtney Bradshaw. Jenn Gniadek for the Golden Panthers kept the Mean Green lineup off balance for most of the game and pitched a complete game, allowing only four hits and one earned run to collect her sixth win of the season.
International relations student sees beauty in simple pose

While Conklin was helping out in a rural village, her mother was concerned about the differences in the availability of modern technology.

"Fortunately, modern technology of the cell phone kept me in touch with her," Cheryl Conklin said. "That may have been what got me through those months of her being so far away -- I don’t know if I could have handled it had I had no knowledge of where she was or if she was OK. I feel Sara’s work in Tanzania basically ‘cemented’ the direction in life she has chosen."

After rethinking her future in the arts, Conklin decided to transfer to FIU to study international relations. At FIU she was given the opportunity to learn more about other cultures and The Sara-Pose really took off, she said.

Darren Shillingford, a fellow FIU student working with her in the executive branch of FIU’s student government, encouraged Conklin to take the photos from a small Facebook album to a website archiving people’s photos and experiences.

He took his own SaraPose photo during a visit home in the Dominican Republic with his best friend of 15 years. He noticed people’s interest in the idea after many people standing nearby started inquiries about the pose.

Those who submitted photos to www.sara-pose.com are asked to write a description of the setting and importance of the moment. Conklin found that some of her favorites were not about the place, but the meaning behind it.

Anamaria Arias had her SaraPose photographed in front of a cathedral in Toledo, Spain while on vacation with her grandmother and dedicated it to her. She said the religious landmark was “a testament to the importance of the spirituality to mankind, and the greatness that can be achieved through tolerance.”

SaraPose participants have taken photos of the pose during monumental events such as their graduation, prom or family vacations. Some have just taken the photo in a local attraction to remember the time spent there and who they were with.

Hollis Bulba, a junior at FIU, took her Sara-Pose photo on a spontaneous trip to Sequoia National Park in California.

"The whole trip was one big spur of the moment after the next and I got to see some of the biggest trees in the world," Bulba said. "My pose conveys a beautifully overwhelming sense of being consumed by something so much bigger than myself. I couldn’t believe where I was."

Those moments move Conklin.

"Sometimes I’ll cry reading [the personal stories] because it’s so beautiful to know that people really take a part of this project on their own initiative and they really just like the idea," Conklin said.

The motto for the project is “uniting the world.” Shillingford said if anyone can do it, Conklin can.

"Sara has enough passion for the world to unite the hearts of everyone. She sees beauty in even the smallest moments, and that is what she is trying to emphasize in the poses," he said.

"I work with the International Student and Scholars Services at FIU. I have already begun spreading the word to FIU’s international community. I know that in the upcoming months, Sara is going to have a lot more poses from around the world. I hope the word keeps spreading."

Conklin hopes for the photo series to grow beyond her group of friends and their friends. The project has yet to receive a photo from a complete stranger. To date, the pose has reached 20 countries and six continents.

Conklin says she hopes to one day reach all seven because to her it means she’d have a piece of herself and her mission all over the world.

"The SaraPose is Sara’s scrapbook of life so far," Cheryl Conklin said. "I feel I am just the tip of the iceberg."

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Adriana Rodriguez, a senior journalism major, produced this story in the JOU 3303 Advanced News Writing course taught by Dr. Fred Blevens.
The Beacon – Wednesday, March 30, 2011

WOMEN'S FILM FESTIVAL TO HIGHLIGHT ARTISTIC CONTRIBUTIONS

KATHY PAZ
Staff Writer

When Kathryn Bigelow won the 2010 Academy Award for Achievement in Directing for her work in The Hurt Locker, some critics were less than pleased. However, her second feature film, Take 2, has shown that she is a force to be reckoned with. The film has been nominated for several Oscars, including Best Picture and Best Director. It is a film that celebrates the strength and determination of women, and it is sure to be a highlight of this year's Women's Film Festival.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

My friend Zeysha and I have been scheming to try Akashi’s Japanese sushi place with a great reputation.

We had our hearts set on the location near Sunset Place, but time and circumstance took us, along with our friend Carly, to their little-known second location, 3444 Main Highway, Coconut Grove.

The moment we arrived at Akashi’s Coconut Grove location is the size of a postage stamp, so we decided to sit on their patio. Though it’s not much larger, it’s surrounded by a low wall of plants, offering some privacy from the street and a bit more elbow room.

Our waitress, though a bit slow on service, was very friendly. We started out with their vegetable tempura, a fool-proof Japanese classic that is consistently delicious no matter where I go.

Although the usual suspects, such as broccoli, carrots and string beans were in the mix, I was pleasantly surprised to find asparagus, zucchini slices and sweet potatoes were added.

Almost anything that is fried is yummy, but I was especially pleased to find that it was piping hot and yummy, but I was especially pleased to find that it was piping hot and crispy. The souped-up dragon roll, or what I like to call a “best of sushi” roll: shrimp tempura, crab salad, and cream cheese topped with avocado, spicy mayonnaise and eel sauce, wrapped in the ubiquitous white rice and topped with tempura crumbs.

Between the slight kick from the spicy mayo, the creamy freshness of the avocado and the savory flavors of the fish, one bite and I was in heaven.

The tempura crumbs were a much-appreciated addition to the meal. Even now, as I type this, I am craving it and no other sushi roll will do.

Another roll of note is the Sunset roll, a combination of salmon, white fish, eel, crab salad, and cream cheese topped with avocado, spicy mayo and eel sauce, wrapped in the ubiquitous white rice and topped with tempura crumbs.

When I mention Akashi to a friend, that has been there, I am always commanded to try the Alex #2 Roll. Let me tell you, I am so glad I followed the advice.

The Alex #2 Roll is basically a souped-up dragon roll, or what I like to call a “best of sushi” roll: shrimp tempura, crab salad, and cream cheese topped with avocado, spicy mayonnaise and eel sauce, wrapped in the ubiquitous white rice and topped with tempura crumbs.

As with any sushi place, hot meals were also on the menu. Zeysha decided to order a side of chicken fried rice along with her sushi. With one bite, I was pleasantly surprised to taste fluffy, flavorful rice with smoky bits of chicken rather than the greasy, overcooked versions I often settle for. The serving was deceivingly small, as that tiny bowl actually managed to fill both of us up.

Contrary to the expensive prices often associated with sushi, Akashi’s menu fits the mid-price range, with its rolls never exceeding $11.95, plus tax, a great bargain considering the portions are quite generous.

Between the three of us, our bill barely came out to $50, including an appetizer and tip. When split three ways, it was a great bargain.

Overall, Akashi is a great, casual place for sushi, with a chill atmosphere, affordable prices and great service. Now, go try that Alex #2 roll!

Food for Thought is a bi-weekly column on food. Look for it every Wednesday.
Charlie Sheen in need of help, not media attention

JORGE VALENS
Editor in Chief

Charlie Sheen has gone from the highest-paid television actor around to one of the most successful Internet movements since Dramatic Chipmunk or Sad Keanu Reeves. But where both the chipmunk and Sad Keaton were hilarious, Sheen is not.

Sheen was a fairly successful actor. Aside from starting as one of the most-watched sitcoms of all time, “Two and a Half Men,” he has had a successful film career. However, his career will forever be overshadowed by his drug problem and dangerous drug habit and the media circus that has surrounded it.

Sheen toured the major talk shows and has done countless interviews in which his behavior was clearly erratic, and after seeing one of his antics it was clear he is suffering from a major problem, a problem that everyone is ignoring for the sake of ratings, readers and entertainment.

Viewers, listeners and followers of Sheen’s media blitz seemed glued to their screens, desperate for any shred of entertainment.

When Sheen registered his Twitter account, it broke the Guinness World Record for the time it took to reach a million followers, 25 hours.

Currently, Sheen’s account boasts 2,869,128 followers. His UStream broadcast brought in hundreds of thousands of viewers as well.

One way or another, Sheen seems to have a similarly worded conclusion: “Charlie Sheen is f**king hilarious, man!”

The fact Sheen is not hilarious, man. Sure, he says stupid things that are funny but the man behind those words is a troubled man with a drug problem. He has people who care for him, kids who love him; he is a human being suffering from a disease and deserves the same for his work. People who market products and benefit from him should be reminded of upcoming deadlines; in fact, these reminders are a form of cancer, and you have to have a disease to be reminded of them.

The mainstream American press and the media circus that has surrounded it would be a bad idea to associate the school’s image with an actor who is well-known not for his acting prowess but for his drug problem. They were just another source, another celebrity. They should be reminded of upcoming deadlines; in fact, these reminders are a form of cancer, and you have to have a disease to be reminded of them.

“His an extraordinary man. If he had cancer, how would we treat him? The disease of addiction is a form of cancer, and you have to have an equal measure of concern and love and lift them up, so that’s what we do for him,” said the actor’s father, Martin Sheen in a Feb. 211 interview with Sky News.

The mainstream American press and the people who market products and benefit from this man’s misery seem to forget that point.

It is time for us to develop a role and be responsible to what is needed in order to be successful. Keeping track of one’s obligations and assignments is just a small part of the world we face.

Time management is a skill that should be developed throughout college. Students use lack of time as an excuse to their failure. It is not the professor’s responsibility to remind us of upcoming deadlines; it is the student’s responsibility to keep track of their classes and obligations.
**PAKISTAN**

11 troops killed in Pakistan attack

Islamist militants ambushed a convoy of Pakistani troops traveling close to the Afghan border on Monday, killing 11 in an unusually bloody attack, a government official said.

**PALESTINE**

Abbas would give up US aid for unity

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas is making a heavy push for reconciliation with Hamas and is willing to give up hundreds of millions of dollars in U.S. aid if that’s what it takes to forge Palestinian unity.

**SYRIA**

President wavers on crackdown or compromise

Syrian President Bashar Assad wavered between cracking down and compromising in some of the Middle East’s most authoritarian and anti-Western nations as protesters in a southern city defied security forces.

**FARMER’S MARKET VISITS, SURVEYS CAMPUS INTEREST**

Luis Roca Contributing Writer

After their first experience with a farmer’s market on campus, students have asked for healthier food stands in Biscayne Bay.

On the first day of March, Brothers Farmers market installed a stand on the north side of the Wolfe University Center, providing fresh and healthy food at reasonable prices.

The stand offered a variety of fruits and vegetables: including pineapples, strawberries, cantaloupes, oranges, grapes, kiwis, tomatoes and others.

Some of the students walking by the stand were surprised and gratified at the same time.

“This is great! Instead of buying a burrito, I can eat fresh fruit and it is even cheaper,” said Michael Vasconez, social science freshman, while buying a pair of peaches.

The Wellness Center invited the farmer’s market as part of the 2011 Wellness Expo.

“The expo was meant to promote health and wellness on campus,” said Donna S. Walcott, assistant director of the Wellness Center.

“The farmer’s market came to campus for the first time and to introduce students and faculty to fruits and vegetables and encourage them to eat better instead of just chips and sodas.”

Three weeks since the expo happened students wait at the return of the market.

“Having access to fresh fruit and [not have] to go out of my way to get it is invaluable,” said Andrew Altemann, a hospitality major.

Raisa Becerra, a public relation senior, agreed with Altemann and said, “I love eating healthy and they should do a [farmer’s market] more often, it’s very convenient for students in the dorms.”

“The idea is to have it every month but we need more sponsors,” said Walcott. “We are also trying to bring the fresh fruit vending machine to campus.”

Unlike Biscayne Bay Campus, the Modesto Maidique Campus has a fresh-fruit vending machine and a farmer’s market that operates weekly.

“I think eating well is very important,” said Andrea Moreno, a graduate student. “We should have the fresh market [at BBC] every month.”

The vendors from Brothers Farmer’s Market were enthusiastic about coming back to BBC.

“We were invited this time,” said Lissette Munoz, manager of Brothers Farmers Market, “but we’d love to come every month.”

At their stand, cantaloupes sold for $2, corn three for $1, two boxes of strawberries sold for $3 and honeydews for $3 each.

Brother’s Farmers Market additionally offers a variety of organic fruits and vegetables. They have two locations one: in Davie and one in Hollywood, but they also specialized in bringing their products to fairs and events.

According to Munoz, the sales at BBC were more than decent for being their first time there.

The continuity of the event will be determined within the next few weeks, but according to Walcott, it is more likely that it will become a once-a-month event next semester if all the logistic are successfully completed.

**DOMINICAN PRESIDENT HINTS AT ANOTHER RUN**

PETER ORSI Associated Press

Former President Jimmy Carter arrived in Cuba Monday to discuss economic policies and ways to improve Washington-Havana relations, which are even more tense than usual over the imprisonment of a U.S. contractor on the island.

Carter was scheduled to meet with Jewish leaders — suggesting that his visit will deal at least partly with the case of Alan Gross, who was arrested in December 2009 while working for Bethesda, Maryland-based Development Alternatives Inc. on a USAID-backed democracy-building project.

Gross has said he was trying to improve internet access for Cuba's small Jewish community. Jewish leaders there, however, have denied working with him.

He was convicted and sentenced to 15 years in prison earlier this month for crimes against the state for bringing illegal telecommunications equipment into the country.

Carter is expected to meet with President Raul Castro, other government officials and Roman Catholic Cardinal Jaime Ortega before leaving on Wednesday.

The trip is under the auspices of the Carter Center, at the invitation of the Cuban government, and is not an official U.S. mission.

Still, both the State Department and Gross' family have expressed hope that Carter's trip may help facilitate the contractor's release.

“We have repeatedly urged the government of Cuba to release Mr. Gross and we encourage others who meet with Cuban officials, including President Carter, to also voice their concerns and make this request," State spokesman Mark Toner said last week.

“If he is able to help Alan in any way while he is there, we will be extraordinarily grateful," Gross' wife Judy E. Gross said in statement over the weekend.

“Our family is desperate for Alan to return home, after nearly 16 months in prison. We continue to hope and pray that the Cuban authorities will release him immediately on humanitarian grounds.”

Cuba calls Gross a mercenary working on a program paid for by Washington that aimed to bring down Cuba's socialist system, and it has presented him as evidence of U.S. intentions to unleash a "cyberwar" to destabilize the island.

U.S. officials say no rapprochement between the Cold War enemies is possible while Gross remains jailed.

Washington and Havana have not had formal diplomatic relations since the 1960s, and the United States maintains economic and financial sanctions on the island.

Carter visited Cuba in May 2002 on a six-day tour during which he met with then-President Fidel Castro and criticized both Washington's embargo and the lack of political pluralism on the island.

Associated Press Writer Andrea Rodriguez; in Havana contributed to this report.