

Bringing Humanitarian Aid to Cuba

May 22, 2004—June 2, 2004

Having the opportunity to visit Cuba for the first time, after waiting 50 years, was truly a remarkable journey. Being able to provide humanitarian aid, and meeting with group after group of non-political organizations to try to learn what life is like, the hardships as well as the joys, was an incredible honor.

I had done some reading over the years, and have a brother who has been involved in bringing humanitarian aid to the Santiago area for the past 8 years. I have spent much time with his Cuban wife and sister-in-law who were permitted to leave Cuba and immigrate to the U.S. With them I was able to further explore what living in Cuba had been like, and discussing reasons for leaving.

It was with this limited information, and the impressions that were formed, that accompanied me on my trip.

The actual journey started months before, knocking on doctors' doors, calling my own physicians, talking to drug companies, networking every angle I could, trying to gather medicine. The one fact I knew for sure was that medicine is badly needed. I was grateful for having been able to accumulate over 30 pounds of medical samples, used eyewear, vitamins, and even soap to help prevent the spread of disease.

What startled me more than anything was how much more was needed. Ambulances could not be used because there were no tires. Cars sat by the side of the road because there were no longer repair parts. Buses could not run because of mechanical problems that could not be resolved. What few trains still worked had limited tracks that were still safe to travel. Housing could not be built, or often not repaired, due to lack of supplies. There was a limited amount of food, a limited amount of clothing or other "material" items available for purchase in the rare case that a family was able to afford to purchase such items. I saw very few cars on the road throughout the entire island, and those that still ran were mostly 50+ year-old American automobiles, as well as a number of European and Russian made which were from a somewhat newer vintage. Good public transportation was almost nonexistent, and often consisted of a truck or wagon being pulled by a horse. I could see crowds of people waiting at the larger "bus stops" and many individuals sitting in whatever shade they could find along a country road, waiting patiently in the hope that some form of transport would come along before it became night. And I saw, with much sadness, how this small island appeared to be caught in mid century, with crumbling cities, towns, and homes. As we traveled across the island toward Havana, not much changed except the scale of disrepair.

There were almost no phones, so often people would have to walk hours in the hope that what they needed would be available. I saw very few electronics and Internet access points, except in areas where there is tourism. And even though electricity had recently been provided to most areas, there was often only one light bulb that had to be moved carefully from socket to socket.

However, even with all this hardship, and I'm sure there is much more that I either didn't experience or don't recall, I was overwhelmed by the beauty, the hope, the kindness, the friendship, the giving nature that describes most of the Cubans whom I met. If asked to select the one outstanding feature of this little island, it would be the character of the people.

The children are deeply loved and cared for. There was very little shyness at the schools and daycare center we visited, because these children have the professional attention that is needed to build self-esteem, courage, and knowledge. All children wore similar school dress so no one was made to feel less or more valuable. All the children were well fed, clean, and happy. And even though many of the school buildings were in desperate need of new paint, shutters, toys, books, pens and pencils, paper, crayons they were absolutely spotless. And totally without graffiti.

Although most housing is humble, there is pride in knowing that their houses are clean. Each is personalized however possible: a picture, a cherished ceramic, a beautifully planted garden. In the cities, hanging from the balconies that still stand, I could see clean clothing drying in the sun, and plants sitting on the railing. As we drove through a rural area, I actually saw a woman sweeping the dirt in front of her home.

It amazed me that I saw no evidence of racism, although I am told by my brother that it does exist, based on skin color. Yet I saw black and white, side-by-side, working, living, eating, and just hanging out.

I saw many Cubans just hanging out, primarily men seeming to be without work or purpose. I did not get the sense that this was their preference. It just was the way things are. I also saw many Cubans who were working in what little industry there is, which is primarily a service industry for tourism. And, again, no matter how menial we North Americans would consider these jobs, I was always greeted with sincere smiles and interest. On my very last day, in my last Cuban bathroom in the Havana airport, the attendant was interested in how I enjoyed my visit, was this the first time?

We met with associations for the blind, the hearing impaired, the physically handicapped, discussing their needs, accessing previous work that we had done, and doling out what supplies our humanitarian group had been able to bring into the country. We heard their compassion for their members. It was an inspiration to meet with Rosa Maria Gomero who was the key person for the Association for the Blind, and although she herself was blind, she is famous for her poetry and songs, charming us with her accomplishments and awards, performing an impromptu poetry reading and then singing with her partially sighted husband and daughter. If I had been able, I would have spent hours with her, learning about her life and her thoughts on the present day Cuba.

We met with hospital administrators and the directors of the maternity center. We learned that medicine was another priority of the country, and all medical care was free to those who need it. If pregnant women are at risk, they are brought into the cities, fed, sheltered, and attended to by qualified doctors and nurses until it is time to deliver. Then they are transferred to the hospital for a professional medical birthing. If pregnant women live too far from the hospital to insure they will be admitted in time for delivery, they spend their last weeks at the maternity home. At the time of our visit, all 30 beds were full, there were several nurses on staff and present, and the women ranged in age from 14 to early 30s. Sitting together in a small, very hot meeting room with us, enduring even more body stress, they were shy but friendly, and we learned that no one there had more than 3 children plus the one in the womb, and that by 27 most women were past their child-bearing years. The center permitted frequent visits from family members who lived close enough to get there. And there was a definite sense that they were taking care of each other.

We met with an independent artisan group, and learned that getting the needed paints, brushes, and other tools to create their art was still an on going problem, yet they created what they could with the materials they had, ever hopeful to be able to get a share of whatever donations are available, and have access to paint, paper, canvass, brushes and other tools on the rare occasions that supplies arrive from the European market. And yet, the paintings and sculpture that we saw was not about hardship, and had no morose themes. They were upbeat, colorful, happy impressions of life in Cuba. We learned that there is little space available for workshops and galleries, and whatever existed was happily shared.

We were fortunate to be in Baracoa during the International Archeology Conference, and I was enchanted by the cave that served as the museum as well as the interpersonal skills of the young adults who planned and directed the presentations. We were treated to wonderful local cake and “high octane” punch, both delicious and served graciously by non-drinking Baptists.

As I think about our experiences and meetings, our work and our time to talk with our Cuban friends and associates, I am reminded over and over again of the kind spirit, the graciousness, and the love. And let’s not forget the wonderful music, always there, always joyful.

For me, the biggest dilemma is how do we help the Cubans attain a robust economy with ample provisions for all, without changing the character of these wonderful people.

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