

ACCESO 2003 (3rd Delegation)

Americans and Cubans Building Community through Exchanges, Support, and Outreach

Trip Report 15-23 February, 2003

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K-2 Logistics Shipping
Lightning Express Storage

Saint Elizabeth's Medical Center
Massachusetts General Hospital
Mount Auburn Hospital
Tag's Hardware
WGBH

Saturday 15 February, 2003

Eighteen of us boarded the bus in the early morning hours of Saturday, February 15, 2003. Despite the early hour we were full of energy and eager anticipation as we began our journey to legendary Cuba. After a long bus ride and flight out of JFK airport we finally arrived in Havana. We were greeted there by our wonderful hosts and guides for the week, Juan Antonio, Jesus, and Manuel.

As delegates for the humanitarian organization, ACCESO, we had embarked on this journey with a tremendous desire to give to the people of Cuba. However, as the week went on, it was we who were truly the recipients, as the Cuban people shared with us their most precious gift: the richness of their abundant human spirit.



Sunday, 16 February, 2003

- **Mass at the Shrine of the Black Virgin**

Several of us had an opportunity to attend mass at the Shrine of the Black Virgin. During Mass, members of the Afro-Cuban religion of Santeria walked in and out of the church to visit the shrine of the Black Virgin. Many wore white and some left flowers at the shrine. It was fascinating to witness two different worshipping practices being conducted simultaneously in a shared place of holiness.

Other members of the group enjoyed a walking tour of Regla. Afterwards we had a tour of Havana and took some time to explore the fascinating streets on our own.

- **Canonazo Ceremony**

That evening we had a wonderful dinner at Divina Pastora. When we first arrived the electricity was out so we chatted by candlelight and were entertained by a group of musicians. Eventually the lights came on and we enjoyed a wonderful meal.

Afterwards we went to the Morro Castle where we witnessed the Canonazo Ceremony, the ceremonial firing of cannons that symbolizes the “closing of the city”. This ceremonial firing of the cannons has been taking place every evening at 9 pm for over a century. It was an impressive ceremony, seeing the soldiers march along the bluff to the beat of drums and crashing surf below.

Monday, 17 February

- **Playa Giron**

We journeyed by bus to Playa Giron, The Bay of Pigs, where we had a moving tour of the Museum of the Failed Invasion.

Following this we had a little time to relax in the sun, play volleyball and swim in the turquoise waters of the Caribbean. We then got back on the bus to go to Cienfuegos. On the way we stopped by a sugar cane field where Jesus, one of our tour guides, cut some delicious sugar cane which we all had an opportunity to sample!

- **Meeting with Cienfuegos City officials**

We were greeted with kisses and flowers. This was a wonderful evening which really had the flavor of a diplomatic mission. The city officials greeted us warmly and held a small reception for us in their welcoming room. Then a smaller group of us met to discuss the “sister province” concept. We extended the warm wishes of Massachusetts General Hospital and told him of the strong international mission that MGH has had since its earliest days. Upon hearing this, the Minister of Health promptly invited us to visit the local hospital the next morning.

Tuesday, 17 February

- **Meeting with Director of Cienfuegos Hospital**

We met with the Director of the Hospital the next morning. He told us that 85% of meds are now manufactured in Cuba. The 15% not manufactured includes chemotherapy. We did not have enough time to tour the hospital. However, a brief glance revealed equipment to be old and we observed a sign that the ultrasounds could not be done that day because the machine was out of order.

- Trinidad

We had lunch in the lovely historical city of Trinidad. After a stroll through the cobblestone streets lined with pastel-coloured houses we met with the local Catholic Charities, Caritas. We met with about 15 local volunteers who were working at the grass roots level to provide services to the poor and elderly of the town. They told us that there were a lot of hungry people in that town. One woman had a group of seniors come to her house every day for lunch. “Sometimes...” she said “All I have to give them is a glass of milk.” She told us, “You may wonder why people ask you for soap but that may be all they have to give their families.

When we left we were told, *“Even if you cannot make a donation your visit and friendship has meant so much. You have inspired our work.”*



Wednesday, 19 February

- **Visit to Director of Nursing**

Note: When Donna told her BC nursing professor, Sister Callista Roy, of her upcoming trip to Cuba, she recounted having met a nurse from Cuba last year at a Pan American nursing conference. The nurse had told Sister Roy of the difficulties they had obtaining nursing books in Cuba due to the U.S. embargo. The two later lost contact with one another. However, Sister Roy had remembered their conversation and asked if Donna could take a copy of her textbook to the nursing school in Cuba. She gave Donna the latest edition of her book, ‘The Roy Adaptation Model’, inscribed with a message inside to nursing colleagues in Cuba.

With our guide, Juan Antonio, Donna, Carmen, and Oz tried to locate the office of the nursing school in Havana. After several unsuccessful attempts, we decided to try the

Ministry of Health. Fortunately there we were able to meet with the National Director of Nursing, Lic. Belkis Feliu Escalona. After being graciously greeted, we explained the purpose of our visit and presented her the book. She recognized the title at once and invited us to sit down. With a heartwarming smile she told us:

This is a very meaningful day, especially considering the U.S. embargo, because it shows that, in spite of the difficulties our governments have, you have come here to foster friendship. It is the spirit of humanity which is important. This is an example of friendship, solidarity, and the human spirit.

Then we were in for a surprise. Ms. Escalona said that she had been at a conference last year where she had met Sister Callista Roy. The Nursing Director had told Sister Roy that she had read some of her manuscripts but could not obtain her book due to the embargo!

At that point we realized that this was the nursing leader who had inspired Sister Roy to send the book! We were all stunned! Sister hadn't even known her name or where she worked in Cuba. This visit truly seemed meant to be!

- **Council of Churches**

This group represents 50 churches in Cuba: Evangelical; Ecumenical; Jewish

Some of the social programs they coordinate are:

- AIDS outreach
 - Work with HIV patients and their families, especially to be with them during the difficult time at the end of their life.
- ETOH (11 groups of help)
 - Help people recover and reincorporate into society & rectify family problems
- Drug Abuse (on the rise) they are working to fight
- Teenage Pregnancy
- Reproductive Health (working with groups at risk such as adolescents). Education regarding sexually transmitted diseases
- Disabilities
- Natural Medicines (nutrition – more natural foods)
- Family Culture
 - This is important because of increased family violence during the economic crisis such as child abuse and divorce. These were new problems that families didn't have to face. At a meeting yesterday the government asked the church to help with this. They are working to encourage better “moral health” and to improve the people.
- Prison Outreach
- Helping pastors with books and bicycles
- Senior Citizen Programs
 - There are 20,000 seniors without family housing in Havana.
 - They provide a meal prior to the church service that feeds 60-70 seniors.

There is a lunch project for elders in 6-7 provinces. This is a new project since 1990.

During the special period the church had a role. People were allowed to bring religions into homes so pastors visit homes by bicycle (like bringing the church into the house). From 1991 they reached out to Evangelical churches in other counties for help (due to economic crisis). 76 groups met together. After the meeting they created their own group in Cuba. They asked the government if they could receive this help for the church and the government said 'yes'.

There is a joint program with the German Evangelical churches for cataract surgery. This had been a problem secondary to the embargo and people going blind. 30,000 patients have been operated on. This program also works with premature babies to prevent blindness, with people who have weak vision and is starting to work with the deaf and blind.

The church is now recognized as a strong movement. This is a "new moment".

In '92 they received the first help from the U.S. in 30 years. An antibiotic came which was enough for 1,000,000 people. It arrived just when a physician was trying to figure out how to get it. This was very emotional.

"On behalf of the Cuban people, we really appreciate the solidarity you've shown us. When we speak to people like you, we speak from our hearts. When you return, remember the great things of Cuba: the values. Say: "We can talk about the care the Cuban people have shown us."

- **Martin Luther King Center**

The Director of the Martin Luther King Center told us that, " We consider ourselves ecumenical because we work beyond the boundaries of religion."

They have several focuses: (a) social/theological, (b) solidarity: with people of North America and other countries in Latin America, and (c) raising awareness in North America of difficulties in Cuba.

They try to help us understand the reality as we see it with the positive things here but also the problems. There is a change in the relationship between the U.S. and Cuba to improve the relations between the two governments.

They are also working in Latin America assisting popular (people's) movements. They feel that after many years of hopelessness, they are beginning to see a hopefulness among the people. Above all, the people of Latin America have come to see that the neoclassical system of capitalism has been disastrous for those on the bottom, the poor. Today the bishops in Mexico called him to say, "the working people there can't take it anymore." The free trade agreements between the U.S. and these countries are disastrous. They are

beginning to work with them. There is growing opposition to free trade in Mexico and Central America.

The director told us, “This is our solidarity program: improving conditions in Central America and raising awareness in the U.S.A. We have built many relationships. They are a member of the World Social Forum which brought together people on Feb. 15th against war.

They have several connections in the U.S.:

Witness for Peace
Oxfam America
Pastors for Peace
Religious Network Leaders of Chicago
Conference of Churches in Illinois
National Church of Christ

They oppose FTAA but are in support of democracy. They are a nongovernmental organization; the government doesn't finance them. But they do have relations in terms of getting approval for programs.

The education program is mostly focused on “popular” education based on Paulo Friere's work: organization of the community. (Formal education is domination of the oppressor). They have 600 people attending social theology program. Thousands of people are attending popular program. Also, they have a national network of popular educators.

Popular education is education for liberation. The community is a *subject* and not an *object*. They are involved in social theology education; the work we do together with the church. The church is not an abstract metaphysical thought. It is related to reality.

Q.: What happens if they don't agree with the government?

A.: Recently the Cuban government created a program for social workers due to an increase in youth crime. So the government realized that these people had just finished junior high but they didn't continue with study or work. This was a breeding ground for social criminal activity. A group of social workers were created to work with these young people at school. People who knew of the MLK center recommended that young people come to the center to be trained and then return to teach others in school. This is an example of how the MLK center cooperates with the government to address problems of society.

Cuba has a strategic position between Central America and the U.S. Drug traffickers carrying drugs from LA to U.S. To avoid the U.S. Coast Guard, they drop drugs into the sea. Drugs come to the coast of Cuba. Some people were selling these drugs in Cuba. Also, drugs were coming in with tourists and leading to increased drug addiction.

What is the interpretation of the Cuban government?

Yesterday, 95 church leaders met with high level of government. They said, "What the government is doing is good but not enough. We need a program for "education of values": ethical, moral, spiritual conscience; work with family and schools. In the U.S. there is strong police action but that isn't enough because the problems are at other levels. Three days ago a famous drug trafficker was sentenced to life in prison in Cuba. They would like a treaty with the U.S. but the U.S. does not want a treaty with Cuba. This harms the people of the U.S. but not Cuba.

They think the best way to attack the drug problem is to create educational and cultural conditions; leisure time for young people. They spent about 5 hours with the Cuban authorities talking about these problems.

There are > 1,200 non-government organizations in Cuba: from lawyers guilds to writers guilds to pigeon racers. This was the first Christian NGO founded and has been open since 1987. They produce magazines, books, and videos. The main issue is loneliness. "We have managed to put ourselves inside society."

Q.: When teaching children in Mexico, they couldn't concentrate because they were hungry. Paulo Friere says to focus on the things that matter in their life. In Cuba, who is the oppressor?

A. In Cuba we have adopted Paulo Friere's methodology to the Cuban situation. We have made an emphasis on the situation of community so the community will be able to face the problems of their everyday life. The participation of citizens is important in everyday life to find solutions to problems. We are teaching them to do that and not to accept as dogma the ideas or statements given by the states. It doesn't mean that there should be a contradiction, necessarily, but that community should be a thinking, creative, responsive, participatory community. The purpose is to solve the problems that we have: economic & social problems.

For example, prostitution was not a problem 15 years ago. After 1991 there was an economic crisis due to collapse of the Soviet bloc. New ethical, social, moral problems emerged such as prostitution and corruption at the middle and lower levels. Family integrity was affected. So we have to help them solve these problems. The Cuban state was focusing on economic recovery but they realized that you must also focus on education and culture. We think you also have to work on ethics, the culture of person and spirituality. So popular education is a practical tool to do that work.

The problem of economic disparity is increasing and almost impossible to solve but the government is trying. Research is being done throughout the country to identify things such as low weight children and eye problems; providing help to those low-income families.

“Without idealizing the Cuban society...While in most countries things are shared by the few...in Cuba, the few things we have we try to share and give a little to all. As a Christian person, I like this society better.”

“The biggest responsibility in the world today is in the hands of the U.S. You can work for the U.S. to be a blessing to the world. If you do not accept that responsibility, that blessing will become a curse. Our church prays for the American people. You are a country with a book. That book is the Bible. We believe that Bible is a spirit. We want that spirit to be alive in the American people.”

Thursday 20 February

- **Panama School for Children with Physical Limitations**

We were all in awe as we witnessed the tremendous work done at this school. When we arrived the children were just leaving the auditorium. They passed by us in a parade of joy. Several had gait disturbances but they were happily helping to push other students who were wheelchair users. As the procession passed by, they were singing happily.

We met the Director and had a tour. The safety fence around the pool that had been paid for through an ACCESO donation had been completed. All the rooms were sparkling clean and the children were all occupied with plenty of teachers and staff. Most of all they were happy! The joy on their faces was a testimony to the good care that they were receiving.

The director told us that there are 163 children here. 50 students or 20% have cognitive disabilities. 93 are from the capitol and go home over the weekend. They realized that it was not good to separate the child from the family. However, some children live 1200 kilometers away so they can only see their family 2 times per year (Christmas/New Year for 21 days) and during July/Aug.) She said that they try to make this school with short classes so they can get home soon.

Services offered include: clinical attention; dentistry; family physician; clinical physician; nurses; and physical therapy. The first priority is health of the child because all have a pathology. They have workshops to learn labor skills including reading & writing classes in the afternoon.



Friday 21 February

- **Visit to local library**

At the library we watched an enchanting performance by local schoolchildren who read stories and poems about the national hero of Cuba, Jose Marti. Following that we were treated to a delightful breakfast prepared by the local culinary school. After the meal we were surprised and delighted to witness the chef come out of the kitchen holding a guitar and he proceeded to play for us!



- **Bejucal**

We had a wonderful visit to the charming village of Bejucal and the library of Jarrett's cousin, Diana. There we were treated to a wonderful feast and incredible display of Afro-Cuban dancing. We were told that it is a dance of the slaves from the Congo called, "The Dance of the Dead". We were told by the mayor, "We appreciate the U.S.' help in releasing Eliane Gonzalez and we hope that we can work together to free the 5 Cubans in U.S. prisons who were working to prevent terrorism in Cuba. It's not just what we brought here but us all working together. *The most important thing is the friendship and solidarity.*"

He thanked ACCESO for the donations of books and stressed the importance of education. He told us that everyone there was literate. Indeed, the value of education was apparent to us in all of our visits. This was clearly a society that placed high value on literacy, which made the need for books all the more pressing an issue.



Bejucal Polyclinic

We met with several physicians, officials and the “Head nurse *and* secretary”. We were told that the polyclinic covered basic health needs: mental health; acupuncture; physical health. It served 123 families and they have 43 physicians. Emergencies come to the clinic where they are triaged and more severe cases are sent to Havana.

The primary problem is cardiac disease. These patients are stabilized and sent to Havana. The second problem is asthma. They have a program for early childhood care. There was only 1 infant death here in Bejucal in the last year. The 3/1,000 infant mortality is better than the U.S.

The head nurse is in charge of the other nurses and getting meds to the patients. She is also in charge of the equipment and assists the surgeon in minor surgery.

There are physicians positioned in certain areas around city who visit people’s homes. The physicians in the neighborhoods don’t work for the polyclinic. Each M.D. has a nurse that works with them.

As a result of the blockade there are a lot of meds and equipment that they cannot get but the government has promised to get more. The government has a hard time due to the blockade and things take a long time. But thanks to groups such as ours they have been able to get things.

ICAP will work with the polyclinic to create a list of the most needed things.

Friday 20 February

- **Comments of Rafael Dausa; Director of North America in Foreign Affairs**

We had an enlightening meeting with Rafael Dausa. He told us that there are two tendencies coming from the U.S. On one side are people who want normal relations which includes groups like ours and the business sector. This feeds into Congress. There is a substantive majority. However there is also an anti-Cuba extreme right sector of Cuban American community and extreme right sector of American society. These people have so far managed to derail any positive tendency. They have an anti-Cuba lobby. They now have a lobby in favor of a change in U.S. policy and he believes that sooner or later the policy will change

A vast majority of American society now, even if they do not agree with the kind of society we have, believe that there is no reason in this world to keep our two people apart. Mr. Dausa told us, “We want peace in the U.S. We don’t have bad feelings towards Americans. In Cuba we have never had any flag burning. There is no hostility or animosity. That is very important – the base of the future. Cuba wants to engage the U.S. in a mutually beneficial relationship. We have recently proposed a treaty with the U.S. to fight against drugs, terrorism, human traffic. Unfortunately the U.S. refused. Just last year Cuba captured 11 tons of cocaine. Cuba does not have a culture of consumption of drugs although there is an increase. With increased communication this could increase to 15-18 tons and also benefit the U.S.”

Dausa stated that over the years, Cuba has made two mistakes. One was the ban on trade with U.S. after the revolution. The second was economic dependence with Soviet Union.

“We woke up one morning in 1991 and realized that the world had changed. 85% of trade was with U.S.S.R.”

After the 2001 Hurricane in Cuba the U.S. asked to send a team re: possible humanitarian aid. Cuba answered that, instead of humanitarian aid, they would prefer to purchase food. The U.S. agreed and a law was passed in 2000 allowing the sale of food. Since 2001 they have started purchasing food from the U.S. The problem is that they must pay in advance with cash. Chicken used to cost \$800-1,000/ton from Canada & Brazil. It is \$400-500/ton from Georgia/U.S. They used to get powdered milk from Australia but to transport is very difficult due to vessel not being able to come to the U.S. for 6 months.

Dausa said that they want to trade again with the U.S. but do not want to ‘put all the eggs in one basket’. Also, they want to change the conditions to being able to buy things other than food, sell things to U.S., increase tourism and eliminate the blockade. Dausa distinguished an embargo from a blockade. “An embargo is simply that...American companies cannot do business with Cuba. But a blockade adds that Cuba cannot enter

international financial institutions. The U.S. threatens other countries who do business with Cuba. It is an economic war against Cuba. ***Nobody has the right to use food and medicine as a political tool.*** 173 countries voted against the embargo/blockade. Only 2 countries voted with the U.S.: Israel and the Marshall Islands

Q. Does anti-Cuba mean anti-Castro?

A. Anti-Castro translates to anti-Cuba

Lack of medicine affects all the people of Cuba

My kids cannot get certain medicines because of the embargo

My mother cannot get certain medicines because of the embargo

Q What about the gap between the professional and tourist sector?

A. This is a reality. It occurs with government officials as well. Some professionals migrate to the tourist industry.

Q. Do foreign companies in Cuba need to give the government 51% of the share?

A. Not exactly. It depends on the type of the business. The range is 1% and up. No foreign partner can own the whole company. They prefer to have the majority of the stock. They prefer 51%. But if the reality is that it could be only 10% then that's the reality.

Q. What are the workers rights if they want to strike?

A. Cuban workers can organize different unions

Q. If the company pays the government and the government pays the workers then some people would call that slavery. Please comment.

A. This cannot be slavery because the workers are paid. The Cuban government represents the interests of the worker vis a vis the company. Also, with the money from the company the government pays for health, education etc.

“At the gates of the school my kids have the same rights as the kids of the owner of the company.”

Q. We find the restrictions on Cubans troubling

A. We are two different societies; two different realities. There are certain particularities.

There are negative things in American society as well such as racism, drug problems, and homelessness.

The main thing is to respect these realities. At the same time, I could assure you that we have taken certain measures, in one way to fan the Cuban revolution but also to improve the social situation. I believe things could change if we do not have to face the hostility of the U.S. You cannot automatically put the concepts of the American society to the Cuban reality. We need to focus on the things we have in common.

- **National Library Eliades Acosta Matos**

We paid a visit to the National Library, which will take responsibility for distributing the 5,000 books that will be shipped in conjunction with this year's ACCESO delegation.

The library director, Eliades Acosta Matos had moving words for us.

“ This is a very important library. Here is the history and memories of the Cuban people. But it is very difficult to run due to the number of books and the need to replenish books. This is important, not only for Cuba, but for the world. Especially when we are on the brink of a war, a war that nobody wants, a war that will be dangerous. ***It is through the sharing of books, the sharing of culture, that people can reach understanding. I look forward to the day when the American people send books to Iraq...when the Israeli people send books to the Palestinians.***”

- **Cooperative Farm**

Friday afternoon we had a chance to visit an inspirational joint venture, the cooperative farm. We were told that at the beginning of the revolution, 70% of land belonged to grand foreign countries. 270,000 farm workers worked these farms. The first law of agrarian reform limited the amount of lands that one individual could own. (1,200 acres max.) So the property was taken and distributed to 270,000 farmers. If land was rented out, it was given to farmers. If it was owned by company, it was given to government.

However there was a problem because individual farmers didn't have equipment to farm so much land. So the second act of agrarian reform decreased to 60 hectares the amount an individual could own. Since then, 300,000 rural workers have received land.

In the late 60s, early 70s, co-ops began. There are two types. The first is a credit & service co-op in which campesinos retain ownership of land but food is sold collectively. Investment is done as a group. This is the most common international model. The second is the type that this cooperative has in which the campesinos sells their land to the co-op and becomes a member of a collective ownership.

The social objectives are to increase the life of everyone in the co-op and members of the community in which the co-op is located. This co-op was started in 1981. 19 farmers came together. They were mostly men due to land traditionally passing from father to son but spouses were full voting members also. They grow: potatoes, Cuban sweet potatoes, plantains, squash, carrots, cabbage, tomatoes, beets, beans, soy, corn. They have full authority to decide what they plant.

Up to 70% of profit goes to members (salary for members, reinvestment into farm utilities). The other 30% stays with the coop for social use. (e.g. a beach house in Havana). The coop has built housing for 86 families. They have 2 buses to bring people

to work, children to school and for excursions. There are social activities on the weekends.

For those of us who visited the cooperative farm we had an unexpected interlude by the side of the road after our bus broke down. However, Cuban solidarity had obviously already infiltrated this hardy band of survivors. A bus “repair prayer” group was quickly formed, led by Fr. Bob. Following that, the two remaining cans of beer were evenly distributed amongst the group, in true co-op fashion. A new bus was sent for and a “Bus arrival time sweepstakes” was launched. The winner was Jarrett who guessed the time of 6:15!



- **Meeting at the American Interests Section**

We spent the evening at the American Interests Section hosted by Chief U.S. Diplomat James Cason where we discussed U.S.-Cuban relations.

- **Epilogue**

Our overall impression was one of tremendous admiration for the Cuban people and what they have accomplished, despite the U.S. embargo. They were truly able to transcend not only material limitations but geopolitical boundaries as they reached out to embrace us with their warm human spirit. As Juan Antonio, our guide told us, *“Always with visitors, no matter where they are from, Cuban people try to give something, even when we have nothing. Cubans are always trying to help.”*

We left Cuba, having been spiritually enriched, and with a renewed sense of commitment to the people of Cuba. The members of ACCESO are already planning how we can continue to build bridges of friendship.