

# Report from the ACCESO Cuba Delegation 2011

## Humanitarian Outreach to the People of Cuba

January 2011

Following months of planning, gathering supplies and donations, and packing; the 2011 ACCESO delegation embarked on the adventure of a life time. The mission of ACCESO is to provide humanitarian outreach to the people of Cuba who are struggling to obtain essential human goods such as medicine, medical supplies, and reading materials. ACCESO sponsors annual humanitarian missions that donate material goods from the United States to Cuba and builds relationships between Americans and Cubans. The January 2011 delegation was under the auspices of the National Library. Our delegation knew we were bringing supplies to the Cuban people, basic quality of life items that are not readily available in Cuba or totally absent for the everyday populace. We were going to Cuba to give, what we learned was that we took more home with us than we gave. The Cuban people taught us some of life's important lessons and we all felt as if we came home with considerably more than we had upon getting on the plane a week earlier in the Miami Airport. We were a delegation of changed people, a band of brothers and sisters, with greater empathy and desire to help our fellow human beings.

Friday, January 14

The 2011 delegation arrived at Gulfstream Charters Desk at the Miami International Airport at 8 am with expected departure to Cuba at 1 pm. Now what could take so long? We learned. Leaving the United States for Cuba is a process with continually counting, watching, organizing and guarding the supply bags, reviewing visas, checking and rechecking our personal and group documents and preparing for our last time to use our phones to text, email and make calls.



We were warned about the old chaotic terminal that we would land in at the Jose Marti International Airport. However, a wonderful surprise greeted us, a newly renovated terminal making our entrance into Havana easier than expected. We left the airport and officially stepped onto Cuban soil and were warmly greeted by Yolanda Nunez from the National Library of Cuba and officials from Havanatur and Gran Caribbean.





After arriving at our hotel, the Hotel Nacional in the Vedado neighborhood of Havana, ACCESO hosted a reception for dignitaries and invited guests from the Cuban government agencies that we would be visiting during our stay such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MINREX), Cuban Institute for the

Friendship with the Peoples (ICAP), ACLIFM, ANSOC, CENESEX, and the Biblioteca Nacional. We Americans had various levels of fluency in Spanish but with the help of our five Spanish speaking group members, our guides, and interpreters we communicated as

friends and colleagues and learned much about each other's duties, populations and cultures. It was not difficult to communicate the topics of friendship, needs and gratitude. The Cubans and the Americans gave brief though formal presentations to each other stressing the need for better

relationships between our two countries and ways in which we could help our Cuban neighbors. This wonderful evening provided our delegation with a look through the window of what was to come.



Dinner followed at Los Amigos, a paladar and a new experience for most of our delegation. We learned about the concept of paladar, a small, family-run, private-owned restaurant in one's home. Dinner at Los Amigos felt as if we were visiting a family and sitting in their living room while

eating luscious local food, such as rice and bean, pork and seafood.

### Saturday, January 15

For those who chose to arise early there was jogging and walking along the Malecon to view Havana in all of its splendor. If you squint your eyes you can see what Havana must have looked like in its heyday and the promise the city has for rejuvenation. We were treated to a tour of Old and Central Havana by our fabulous guides Clem & Alain and ate a delicious lunch at an old Havana restaurant called La Mina.



After lunch, we visited the Library of Regla and prepared all of our bags for the trip ahead.

### Sunday January 16

On Sunday morning the group left the Hotel Nacional and boarded our bus for a tour of Old Havana and a trip to the art market in Old Havana. It was very interesting to see more of Havana and get a better sense of the layout of the city. Also, we conducted a walking tour along the harbor. We were able to admire the Fortaleza de San Carlos de la Cabaña also known as La Cabaña across the harbor. La Cabaña is an 18th-century fortress and is the biggest in the Americas.



During the afternoon we loaded the bus with the bags that we will bring to the stops ahead.

Sunday evening we dined at El Aljibe in the residential neighborhood of Miramar. El Aljibe is a well known restaurant in Cuba and we thoroughly enjoyed our second evening of sampling Cuban cuisine.

### Monday January 17

On Monday morning we boarded our bus to head to our first small town, Colon in which we all felt as if we had a personal connection. Colon was the childhood home of Margie K, one of the Cuban Americans on our delegation. Our 3.5 hour trip flew by as we learned about the history of Colon from our guides as well as personal anecdotes from Margie. A town was founded in 1846 and around 1859 the railroad reached the town and subsequently the town became an important railway center and was renamed Colon. Colon's economy is based on agriculture (sugar cane, tobacco, citrus fruit) and stock raising. Margie took us around the square and described the buildings, their function and home life when she was a child before the Cuban government changed to a Communist country. Our delegation went to the Colon Municipal Library to bring books for both children and adults. Many of us were amazed at the empty shelves waiting for donated books and were pleased to see some people of the town reading and studying in the room. The librarians proudly showed us the books ACCESO brought last year and how lovingly the books have been used.



### Tuesday January 18

We were on our way to central Cuba to the city of Santa Clara on Tuesday morning to visit the Santa Clara Library and the Fructoso Rodriguez Special School for children. Santa Clara is almost 200 years older than Colon, is an industrial city and home to one

of the universities in the country. Our first stop was the “Fructuoso Rodriguez” Special school for disabled children (mainly sight and hearing disabilities) to meet with Juan Sanso Alfonso, principal of the school. Before we presented our donations we received a formal presentation from the students. Next stop was a meeting with Edel Mora Mora, director of the library and then a stop at “Che Guevara” Revolution Square. We hence learned that a presentation from students is the tradition when missions of our kind are traveling through a town.



Wednesday January 19

On Wednesday morning we again boarded our bus to visit trip leader Oz M's home town of Fomento. Fomento is a very small town with not much to do but to sit, drink coffee and eat. Our destination in Fomento was the Fomento Library which also has a center for the blind. While at the Fomento Library we delivered numerous duffel bags filled with Spanish language books for children. We learned about all the wonderful services the library provides to the community and met some of the local school children. The books, as well as the art supplies and toys we left were all very much appreciated and treasured by the children.



After our meeting at the Fomento Library, we spent an hour exploring the central square and the surrounding neighborhood. We then boarded our bus and headed back to Santa Clara. Once in Santa Clara we had lunch and had time to continue to explore the city and the nearby Parque Vidal.

Wednesday evening after dinner at our hotel, Los Caneyes, we returned to Santa Clara to a local art gallery, bar and club called El Mejunje. We enjoyed the opportunity to tour the gallery and spend some time talking to the artists. Over the many years El Mejunje has been in operation it has also become something of a community cultural center. It was very interesting to spend time here and have a chance to meet some of the people of Santa Clara.

#### Thursday January 20

When we left Santa Clara for Havana on Thursday morning we had no idea about the powerful experience we were all going to share. Our mission for the day was to bring school supplies, books and general programatic supplies to the Escuela Especial “Solidaridad con Panama” for youth with physical disabilities, a school supported by ACCESO for many years. As with all of our other stops we were welcomed warmly and graciously by Esther La O’Ochoa, principal of the school and her staff and the students. Panama School is for profoundly physically disabled students, most residential, who receive daily physical therapy and training for activities of daily living and occupational and vocational training. Our delegation was in awe of the skills and adaptations achieved by the students and we were all inspired by the philosophy of the school and the confidence and positive attitude that radiated from every one there. The students were confident of their abilities and appeared to use their skills to the maximum as



evidenced by an artistic performance they gave to us. One student with a minimal lower body belted out a song and another young girl with stumps where legs should be danced a ballet number which brought tears to our eyes. And as in the past they were



appreciative and grateful for all the supplies and books we brought for them and showed us how they are using the items brought to them by ACCESO in the past.



Friday January 21

Early in the morning we set out to visit our sponsor, the National Library main site. We met with Dr. Eduardo Torres Cuevas, director of “Jose Marti” National Library and Idalmis Rojas Martinez, director of Regla Municipality’s Library with donations for both libraries.



In the early evening we closed our mission trip by meeting with the United States Interests Section Chief, Jonathan Farrar. He answered questions about his responsibilities and US/Cuban relations including opportunities and limitations implemented by the Obama administration.

Our trip was winding to the close and as we did other evenings we treated ourselves to the “last” Cuban cigars, Bucanero beers, art purchases and dancing at the hotel’s lobby.

### Saturday January 22

Sadly, this was the last day of our trip. Many in the group spent the last few hours returning to their favorite spots in Havana for a final goodbye. Then it was time for the bus ride to the airport. After a short trip through customs we awaited our departure with some final Bucaneros. After our 45 minute flight our journey ended with our return to Miami.

Everyone on the trip was profoundly affected by our mission. We were told this would be a life changing adventure and it certainly was. We brought books and supplies for the people of Cuba. We brought home new attitudes to what is important in life and that we can all do a little more.

## Acknowledgements

This trip would not have been possible without the support of many people and organizations that helped with travel planning and donation of supplies. While we cannot name every individual we would like to extend our sincere thanks to you all. Special thanks to the 13 delegates who made this January 2011 a total success!