

## **Karen Stuhldreher**

Putting into words what I learned, felt, and experienced from traveling to Cuba with the U.S. Women and Cuba Collaboration is difficult because the experience and how it moved and changed me seems to transcend mere words. Cuba for me now is a montage of images and colors, landscapes from the bus window, people's faces, art and architecture, as well as sounds—music and street noises, the ocean's waves along the Malecon, people's kind and intelligent words and voices, and the blast of a cannon at 9 pm sharp. One image that stays with me is walking around a corner of a quiet street on a Saturday morning in Cienfuegos and seeing a woman in a long flowing, orange dress playing a flute while a man in black holding sunflowers balances on a step and a woman in flowing white across the street dances in front of a mural of sunflowers painted on an old wall. We thought we had come upon a magical street performance, but then we—the members of our delegation—were receiving the sunflowers and it became clear that this was a welcoming for us into the Trazos Libres community and gallery where we met artists and scholars and photographers who are working to bring greater understanding about race, the history of slavery, and gender issues. Through a translator I was able to talk with a group of young women working as journalists with government support because there is an interest in having more women's perspectives in reporting from communities.

We were similarly welcomed into a neighborhood of working folks in Santa Clara who clapped as we got off the bus. We were led to chairs in the center of this street lined with concrete homes where a man from the local CDR spoke with excitement about the many projects they work on together from recycling to efforts to free the Cuban 5. A young girl still in her school uniform read a poem and another in a sparkling red costume danced for us. An old man also read a poem and at the end all of the people joined him in the refrain: Free the Cuban 5! I was moved by the generosity and camaraderie of these neighbors who came out of their homes at night after dinner on a workday to meet with us and be with one another.

Another image that surfaces is a of doctors and nurses leading us through a maternity home in Santa Clara where women pregnant with twins or those having some complications requiring bed-rest have all of their medical needs cared for up to the time of delivery. The Maternity Home is a bridge between primary and secondary levels of medical care. There is nothing fancy here, but imagine free medical care from doctors, nurses, nutritionists, and psychologists for all women in need.

And also in Santa Clara we visited the colorful cultural space of El Mejunje where we met with lesbians from provinces throughout Cuba to exchange ideas and share experiences. The friendships we made that day as we ate and talked together continue on.

I feel honored and grateful to have been able to visit and learn about such significant political and cultural places. From ICAP (The Cuban Institute for the Friendship with People) to the national headquarters of both the FSM (Federation of Cuban Women) and CENESEX, to Community Centers and neighborhood Casas for women and run by women, we met highly educated, energetic, hopeful, and talented people from whom we learned so much. I was struck to learn of the advancement of women in Cuba who are the majority of doctors, lawyers, judges, and educators. We in the U.S. have so much to learn from Cuba and its people.

All of these people, places, and images I have described inspire me now to educate people here and to continue learning and working in ways that reflect Trazos Libres, El Mejunje, and the neighborhood CDR's and Casas—all of which integrate art, politics, community, and culture to bring forth greater collaboration, understanding, and justice.

To the people I met in Cuba, my sisters in this delegation, Cindy, Moon, and Tatiana I am truly grateful.