

## **Misa Shikuma**

Like many of my fellow Americans, Cuba has always persisted in a shroud of mystery and negative propaganda. So it was with the utmost curiosity that I joined the delegation that traveled to Havana, Via Clara and Cienfuegos in September 2014. Going in with an open mind, I found that our group was met with open arms - and more importantly an open dialogue - by groups including ICAP, the Cuban Women's Federation and CENESEX. We learned so much about the struggles of Cuban society since the revolution from their perspective (a refreshing change from the way American schools treat the subject at home), and got to witness the effects that the lasting blockade and travel ban have had.

One of our most memorable visits was to the Literacy Museum, which chronicled Fidel Castro's successful volunteer-run campaign to eradicate illiteracy in the furthest reaches of the island nation. Students as young as 9 left their homes to work in the fields alongside rural farmers and teach them how to read and write at night. To this day the methods used by Cuban educators are lauded and employed elsewhere in the world where illiteracy still persists. This, in contrast with the experience of the many educators who comprised our delegation - and who routinely receive students at the community college level who are illiterate, was mind-blowing. The visit was a reminder that the relationship between the US and Cuba does not need to be a study in contrasts; rather if we could move past the fraught political history there is much that we could learn from our neighbor to the southeast.