

## **Report and Reflections on the Women's Travel Challenge to Cuba 2005**

**Report by  
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**Reflections by  
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Women's Travel Challenge 2005 Delegates**

Four Seattle women participating in a Women's Travel Challenge to Cuba returned to the US on August 1, 2005, joining hundreds of other travel challengers at Fort Erie, Ontario, Canada, in a march across the International Peace Bridge into Buffalo, NY. The women's Cuba trip was planned in coordination with the Federation of Cuban Women and included meetings with community leaders, attendance at a conference on terrorism, and educational exchanges at such sites as a hospice for mothers, an organic farm, a center for sex education, and a center for elders.

Almost all travel to Cuba is now illegal for US citizens, and the Women's Travel Challenge joined other organizations (including the Venceremos Brigade and Pastors for Peace, who have long histories as travel challengers) in making full disclosure of the fact that they would be traveling to Cuba without US government approval or license. US restrictions against travel to Cuba have been in place since 1963.

Group members included the co-founders of the US Women and Cuba Collaboration. Cindy Domingo, an aide to King County Councilman Larry Gossett, and Jan Strout, Northwest NOW Organizing Project Director, are frequent Cuba visitors. For Diana Esperas, a gardener and landscaper, and Jean Colman, Executive Director of the Welfare Rights Organizing Coalition in Washington State, this trip to Cuba was a first; both are active members of the US Women and Cuba Collaboration. All four women appreciated the opportunity of learning exchanges with Cuban women; since the Cuban Revolution the women of Cuba have enjoyed some of the highest levels of education, health benefits, reproductive justice, and economic opportunities in the world as measured by UN agencies.

Their goal in this Women's Challenge was ongoing solidarity with Cuban women in protest of US laws that limit travel and trade with Cuba. They hope to create awareness that the US government does not represent the sentiment of thousands of Americans who have traveled to Cuba over the years as activists, tourists, students, academics, prospective business partners, and humanitarians, as well as those who have not yet visited the island but want to go to see a "revolution in progress" and enjoy the opportunity for cultural exchanges with Cubans.

All the travel challengers risked fines and other penalties following their return to the US, but they are committed in their belief that such acts of civil disobedience are vital work in the practice of citizenship in a democracy. The Bush Administration has stepped up longstanding efforts to isolate Cuba and to control travel in recent years, and this year's

Pastors for Peace Friendshipment of material goods bound for Cuba was held up at the Texas border unexpectedly, with computers and other school-bound materials confiscated. On return, Cindy Domingo was separated from fellow travelers for careful scrutiny by US Customs officials, and all returning travelers were subjected to examination of the contents of all luggage.

Deidre Gauff of the US Women and Cuba Collaboration could not go on the travel challenge as first planned, but she traveled to Toronto to join the Seattle women, other travel challengers, and their many other supporters in making the border crossing.

Cindy Domingo and Jan Strout were interviewed the morning after their return from Cuba on KUOW's Weekday (Seattle/NPR) by Steve Scher. All participants of the Women's Travel Challenge were available in Seattle for additional interviews, and the group hosted a community forum in Seattle about the trip on September 13 at Langston Hughes Cultural Arts Center, 104 17<sup>th</sup> Ave South.

Each participant has different reflections on her experience, and the thoughts of three of the women follow:

#### **Cindy Domingo's Reflections**

"The struggles waged by nations are weak only when they lack support in the hearts of women." This statement, made in 1892 by Cuba's national hero, Jose Marti, has been brought alive to me in so many ways by the many Cuban women working for the revolution who I have met since my first trip to Cuba in 1999. They are precisely why the Cuban revolution remains strong even in the midst of the U.S. blockade that has labored to undermine the interests of the Cuban people for 45 years.

In this last trip, I saw the heart of the Cuban revolution in particular in the faces of the wives and mothers of the Cuban Five. These women are relatives of five men who infiltrated Florida's notorious Cuban exile groups who are known for carrying out terrorist acts against the Cuban people and government. For reporting these illegal activities to the U.S. government, the men were given sentences of up to life in prison to be served in U.S. prisons. For seven years, the women have courageously led an international movement to free their loved ones and to educate people about the history of murder, assassination attempts, and subversive activities conducted by the Florida groups, often with U.S. government support. A week after we returned from Cuba, the Cuban Five's appeal for a new trial was granted--a victory of their families and the thousands of Cuban and U.S. activists that worked for this long-awaited decision.

Our visits to Cuba are always about continuing our work with the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC). Representing 85% of Cuban women and girls over 14 years of age, the FMC has been an ongoing source of inspiration for our solidarity work, as well as for our efforts to build a women's movement in the U.S. that addresses the needs of all women, especially those who have been disenfranchised from society due to race and class. On this trip, we were once again greeted by our old friends, Arelys Santana Bello, the new

secretary general of Havana province which has one million FMC members, and Alicia Gonzalez Guitierrez, who works with the North American international relations office.

If the blockade has intended to impede our work with the FMC and the Cuban people, it has not succeeded. Through our discussions with Arelys and Alicia and the other women we met with on this most recent trip, the Women's Travel Challenge 2005, we have laid new plans to further our work of building true sister to sister relations based on love, mutual respect, and real security for all people of the world.

### **Jan Strout's Reflections**

It is impossible to think of Cuba without incorporating the lens of events currently unfolding in the United States. We arrived in Habana on July 20<sup>th</sup>—just after the devastation of Hurricane Dennis had impacted most of the eastern provinces of Cuba. What we saw and learned about this experience demonstrates Cuba's ability to plan for and prioritize all their national resources to prevent, anticipate, and then respond fairly and swiftly to natural and political disasters. As evidenced at the July 26<sup>th</sup> celebration of the anniversary of Cuba's struggle for self-determination and independence, President Fidel Castro spoke about the need for ongoing and evenly-applied economic development, applied equitably to all sectors of the Cuban people throughout the country. Right now Cuba is offering medical assistance to US survivors of our own Hurricane Katrina.

Other sources of inspiration important to me during our time in Cuba were the visits to offices of the *Federacion de Mujeres Cubanas* (Federation of Cuban Women or FMC), to *Hogar Materno* (Maternity Home) and to *CENESEX* (National Center for Sex Education). Imagine living a society where sexuality is part of healthy human development, where all people have access to holistic and prevention-oriented health care, and where women can fully exercise reproductive rights to choose whether or not to have children. In Cuba, women have rights to abortion and other reproductive health care (performed by a licensed doctor and in a hospital) as well as one year's paid maternity (or for men, paternity) leave.

At the *Hogar Materno*, we visited with women who have difficult pregnancy challenges and need special care for several weeks or months to ensure they will bring a healthy child into the world. These forms of essential health care are not based on the ability to have health insurance or ability to pay. This is a right for all Cubans and a key reason why Cuba has one of the lowest infant and maternal mortality rates in the world. Here is an example of a society that values and commits the majority of its resources to a "culture of life" including human, community, social, and economic development for all.

I have observed in the U.S many progressive activists reeling from the fallout of our 2004 Presidential elections and even falling into despair and hopelessness. From this trip to Cuba, as always on my many previous visits, I take courage and inspiration from the Cuban people who have struggled for many, many decades for their vision of social and economic justice and human rights and who continue to resist the forces of injustice and

war that dominate our own landscape. Failure is impossible with the inspiration from Cuba.

Finally, I can never overlook the fun we all had in Cuba with the music, joy, and Cuban capacity for living life to its fullest! The experiences of this 2005 Women's Travel Challenge will sustain me in the months and years to come.

### **Jean Colman's Reflections**

I have always wanted to go to Cuba, but the timing and money had not previously worked out. While I did not relish going to the Caribbean in July—heat, humidity, and hurricanes came to mind—July 2005 was my time to go. I admit I was concerned that this trip was a travel challenge and therefore not covered by the legal protections of a travel license, but this fact really did not enter into my final decision to join the delegation.

Having been a leftist for most of my adult life, I wondered what the Cuban revolution would look like up close. I had followed, after the fact, the Algerian revolution. I saw too how China was backsliding on its revolutionary principles soon after "Nixon opened China up" to global capitalism. In considering Cuba's revolution, I was concerned on my visit that I would see backsliding on issues of gender, race, and class.

I was pleasantly surprised. There are problems, and the country is not perfect, but Cubans are actively struggling with the contradictions of being a socialist country in a capitalist world. And they are at least asking the right questions about gender, race and class oppression.

My favorite visit was to the Senior Center. The women were so excited about us being there that they were talking over one other. At one point, our translator, Tatiana, had to ask them to speak one at a time. They told us about their Senior University, which all of them had attended and from which each had graduated from classes. They explained to us that in each class they form a "family," and each family member acknowledges the uneven educational and literacy level still apparent in their generation. Classes are made up of people with different educational and literacy levels and life experiences, and each family member works to ensure that everyone teaches and everyone learns.