

## A Journey to Cuba

By Debbie Kippley, Ph.D., Past-President

I was a member of a delegation from the NAEA to Cuba. Our primary purpose was to look at Arts Education in Havana. There were 27 in the delegation from 25 different states representing elementary, secondary and higher education art educators.

It is a 45-minute plane ride from Miami to Havana. Havana reminded me of Palermo, Sicily. You can still see buildings that were devastated from WWII next to renovated buildings; however the renovated buildings are few and far between in Havana. Old Havana reminded me of the French Quarter in New Orleans.

Cuba is a socialist/communist country with a group of citizens who are 40 and younger slowing demanding change. Education is government funded but only compulsory through 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Students must pass exams to go on to state-funded secondary school or college.

When Castro began the revolution he decided to keep the arts and culture alive to promote happiness among the population. We saw the national ballet and it was amazing, a print making studio that was incredible, but as someone who comes from a free society it is a little disturbing to see the arts “used” in this way.

We visited an elementary school that was deliberately chosen. The teachers had completed secondary school and would have the opportunity to get a bachelor’s degree while they are teaching. There were four boys in a “staged” painting lesson. They were painting pictures about how the US embargo affects them.

Children are children everywhere. Dressed in school uniforms, they performed for us and we mingled with them as they had their snacks - some taken out of Hanna Montana backpacks. The Disney Channel is one of the four TV channels the country allows.

There are schools for students with special needs. These schools seemed to meet the needs of these students with provisions for older students like a day school and care facility. As far as we could tell it seemed that families were free to select these opportunities for their students. The arts were also present in these schools probably once more to promote wellbeing and happiness.

We visited a secondary school and a college level school for the arts. To be admitted into these amazing facilities a student has to pass five exams. Each school had fewer than 150 students. The government guarantees a job on the completion of their degrees at either level. When you consider the population, this was a very selective group of individuals. There were less visual art students than the other arts disciplines because there are fewer jobs available in the visual arts.

Our tour guide and a very articulate man I met at an indoor flea market were both college educated and former teachers. Government supported teaching positions net about 800 Cuban Pesos per month, which is not enough to support a family.

Cuban Pesos are the currency they are paid from a government-funded job. However in the tourist industry you are paid in Convertible Cuban Pesos, which are worth more and can be used in places where tourists shop. It is more profitable to work in the tourist industry.

Each year Cubans receive a booklet of how much each family member may purchase from the government store; dairy products, sugar, flour etc. However, there is no guarantee there will be enough on-hand and you may only buy from the stores in your community. If you need to buy these things from a private store it is more expensive. Our guide said at one point "We are not supposed to want material things but we are human."

The divorce rate among young Cubans is very high because three generations live in one residence. Young married couples have no privacy.

We were asked to tell our government and President Obama to lift the US embargo several times. However as the Cubans who are 40 and younger and who were not alive during the revolution gain more access to the western world, the Cuban government may be opening a Pandora's Box they were not expecting.

While American schools are under criticism we need to realize that all over the world education is only compulsory through middle school. While secondary schools and universities may be state funded, admittance into these programs are very selective and require stringent entrance exams. Each time I have the opportunity to visit schools in another country I am reminded that no matter how frustrated we get with our schools, to my knowledge this is the only country in the world that educates every child that walks in the door regardless of their ability or their parents legal status.