

Collaboration's 2015 U.S. Women's Delegation Advances Women's Human Rights, Racial Justice and Community Development through Exchanges and Solidarity Projects in Santiago and La Habana!!



Twenty women from the United States with diverse multi-cultural, geographic and age backgrounds brought their curiosity, interests, skills and expertise to learn from and share with Cuban women and men. These intrepid women reached the 2nd largest Cuban city, Santiago de Cuba, on Saturday, November 14, 2015, to spend the next 10 days in both Santiago and the Capitol of Havana exploring and exchanging views and experiences around our Delegation theme, "Advancing Women's Human Rights, Racial Justice and Sustainable Community Development." Set in the context of the recent process to begin the restoration of diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuban governments in December, 2014, this Delegation gave us an early look at how women and all Cubans are experiencing the impacts of these changes and so much more. Our days and nights were filled with formal and informal meetings, site visits, walking tours, participation in cultural events, organization of a special *Encuentro*/gathering on preventing and addressing Gender-Based Violence with Cuban and U.S. women academics and activists and tasting all that Cuba has to offer in *paladars*/home-based restaurants or viewing the Caribbean Sea from historic sites or rooftop bar vistas.

Some of the Delegates' highlights included meaningful exchanges on gender, race and sexual rights in Cuba and the United States, Caribbean and global cultural connections, understanding about emerging changes in Cuba, providing support to the US Women and Cuba Collaboration's solidarity projects for lesbian rights in Santiago with Las Isabelas and the Cuban women communicators launch of their new book, *MAGIN* in Havana. Co-Lead by Nataka Moore,

Associate Professor, Adler University, and community activist, Chicago, and Jan Strout, co-chair, US Women & Cuba Collaboration, and Instructor at Montana State University who participated in the 2013 Delegation to Havana and provinces of Pinar del Rio and Matanzas. A number of women had returned on this Delegation to again participate and about one-half were seeing Cuba for the first time.

Our time in Santiago de Cuba was culturally rich with site visits to the Casa del Caribe (House of the Caribbean), Casa del Religion (exploring the African influence in Cuba's religions of Santeria and more), Museo de Carnival (tracing the history of Cuba's African religion *Orishas* and music and dance) and Tumba Francesca (with a focus on Haiti and other French and African influences in the Caribbean). Live music was available on street corners, the Iris restaurant and jazz club, Casa de la Trova and upstairs in our Casa Grande hotel rooftop bar. In Havana, history, culture, music and the arts abounded at our site visits with the *Callejon de Hamel* featuring murals, rumba dancing featuring the *Orishas*; Museum of Fine Arts; walking tours of *Habana Vieje*/Old Havana with the Federation of Cuban Women's clothing store Quintan; and on the role of arts in community development projects. We also could appreciate the coveted role of the City of Santiago which prides itself as the 'Cradle of the Cuban Revolution' with our tour of the Moncada Barracks with its early attempt to overthrow the Batista dictatorship in 1953 resulting in Commander Fidel Castro's imprisonment and writing of his famous call to action, "History will Absolve Me."

The beautiful and inspiring opportunity to meet with members of *Las Isabelas* in Santiago who are part of a national network to advance the rights and support of Cuban lesbians and allies was especially meaningful as the Collaboration has been reaching out to other lesbians and allies in the United States to engage and educate about strategies to claim their sexual and human rights. In Cuba this work complements the National Center for Sex Education's (CENESEX) Campaign to End Homophobia lead by its director Mariela Castro. Our site visit to the newly restored maternity hospital allowed our delegates to more fully understand and consider how the maternal and infant mortality rates are so low in Cuba as compared to the United States and its Latin American and Caribbean neighbors. Not only does this happen because all health care is free and one of Cuba's priorities, but because the needs of women who have pregnancy challenges are given highly effective care and services to ensure safe and healthy births for mothers and babies.

In Havana, members of our Delegation had the tremendous experience of exchanging with Cuban women from the University of Havana's Department of Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies, Federation of Cuban Women, *Mujeres* magazine and other media, journalists, and advocates at a half-day *Encuentro*/gathering on **Gender-Based Violence** from multicultural perspectives. Coming a week before the **International Day to End Violence Against Women** on November 25th, the research and action strategies at the *Encuentro* also shared by US women from our Delegation created powerful ways to address and prevent violence against women locally and globally. In addition, leading Cuban women feminists and communicators with whom the Collaboration has supported in solidarity for over 20 years had just published their collection of essays in *MAGIN* and we enjoyed their personal stories while in the home of one of its authors and hope to help distribute in the US.

We wish to thank our US travel provider Marazul Charters and Amistur in Cuba for their service and support at a time of rapid expansion of tourism by the United States into Cuba. And to thank our co-sponsors the Chicago Global Health Alliance, NOW Global Issues and Strategies Committee and Women's International League for Peace and Freedom's Cuba & Bolivarian Alliance Committee. There is not enough room to write about all of the changes we witnessed and experienced in Cuba in this report, but look for that in an upcoming article.