

Moon "Luna" Vazquez, Co-Leader 2012 Delegation Women and Cuba Collaboration Coordinating Committee

On the island of the Republic of Cuba time seems to have stopped in the 1960's in so many ways, from the forms of transportation to the agriculture equipment to the flakey old paint on the otherwise gorgeous colonial buildings. Time also seems to have halted with the sidewalks that are cracked and broken as well as with the walls of the malecón that tenuously hold back the Gulf of Mexico. I've traveled to Cuba on multiple delegations, and each and every time I arrive feeling as though I've come back home. Being of Puerto Rican descent, I can identify with what Cuba's national hero and poet, Jose Martí, said of Cuba and of Puerto Rico. He said they are "two wings of the same bird." So right he was. Both islands are filled with natural beauty in their land and their people.

In early September the U.S. Women and Cuba Collaboration spent twelve days in a delegation living and traveling the country. In Havana one of our meetings took place at the headquarters of the Federation of Cuban Women with wives and mothers of the Cuban Five. We spoke candidly with Antonio Guerrero's mother, Mirta Rodriguez, who is 80 years old; with Irma Sehwerert Milejan, the mother of René González Sehwerert; and with Elizabeth Palmeiro Casado, the wife of Ramón Labañino Salazar. Their relatives, along with three other Cuban men, have spent the last fifteen years in the United States prison system under inhumane conditions. Known as The Five Heroes, they were falsely accused on September 12, 1998 by the U.S. government of committing espionage, of conspiracy against the United States, and of other related charges. The Five's actions were never directed at the U.S. government. They never engaged in nor planned any conspiracy against this government. The first meeting the Collaboration had with the wives and mothers of the Five was in March of 2002. We all were younger then and somewhat naïve, believing that the men would be released in a short amount of time. Here it is, ten years later for us and fifteen years later for these men, sons, fathers, mothers, wives, children, families, and friends. In fact, for the entire nation of Cuba, the Five Heroes' imprisonment has been a nightmare of grave magnitude. At our meeting that day in September at the FMC, we agreed that we need to educate the U.S. people concerning the unjust imprisonment of the Cuban Five, that we must better communicate the fact that the media has misrepresented the case, and that we need to put a human face on each of the Five Heroes. These five men ARE men of honor. We agreed that what the U.S. government has done and is doing is horrendous; the continued imprisonment of these men is a human rights violation and an outright hate crime against the Cuban Five, their families, and the entire country of Cuba. The U.S. Women and Cuba Collaboration agrees that the U.S. government has to be held accountable for these and other injustices.

On a lighter note, the delegation traveled onto the southeastern area of the island, some 540 miles southeast of Havana to the second largest city in Cuba, the city of Santiago de Cuba, established in 1515. In my opinion this is the place where the finest of Cuban rums comes from. Santiago is surrounded on land by the Sierra Maestra. These mountains determine the hot and humid climate, and the landscape features a rich combination of urban, natural, and marine elements. Unlike Havana where the streets are flat, Santiago has avenues and streets which are steep. While in Santiago, we had the good fortune of meeting with the "Isabelas." This group established a decade ago of about twenty-five lesbians is on the frontline of Santiago's activist community and of other provinces, working closely with Mariela Castro of the Cuban National Center for Sex Education (CENSEX) to bring awareness of the country's anti-homophobia campaign. This campaign primarily focuses on educating people about the injustices of homophobia. The problem is redefined as a problem of intolerance, and not a problem of gay identity. The Isabelas talk to the community about issues of HIV awareness and AIDS prevention, women's health, networking, or the value of just having fun spending the day at the beach. These women are inspirational, even though their job is far from complete. With their public commitment to living as out lesbians, these women are truly pioneers of the Revolution. After traveling to Cuba for over a decade, the members of this delegation had the honor of meeting them. We spent the afternoon talking about collaborating on some future projects, recognizing that we are "nuestras amigas y familia."

The Cuban Revolution keeps developing its manifestations and its ideologies. It keeps giving power back to the people as it listens and learns and broadens its application. This revolution does give power to the people. It is a fluid, organic, living power, and if you sit in silence at times, you can hear it breathing. I will continue traveling for the rest of my life to this small island located in the northern Caribbean Sea where the Gulf of Mexico merges with the Atlantic Ocean. This passion is at the center of my life.