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"Universidad innovadora por un desarrollo humano sostenible"



Thawing relations between Cuba and the U.S. continue to make headlines, including a March visit by President Barack Obama. A few weeks prior to his historic trip, SU President Janet Dudley-Eshbach was in Havana for an international higher education conference. She discusses her experiences in this Q&A with *SUMagazine*.

From Salisbury to Cuba: The Arc of Change

You came back from Cuba with new perspectives, which you shared with the campus. Yet, this was not your first time visiting the country. You also visited in 2002. How did your most recent trip compare?

Much remains unchanged as compared to my visit 14 years ago. The most noticeable difference is that the country, Havana in particular, is poised for a dramatic increase in U.S. tourism. New hotels are being built, and mom and pop businesses are making the most of it. In-home restaurants called "paladares" cater to tourists, and Cubans who own vintage automobiles in mint condition hover outside the best hotels, hoping to interest Americans in a trip down memory lane ... all for a few dollars or euros.

One thing you've mentioned in writing about your visits is the spirit of the Cuban people. Did you find, 14 years later, that there still exists a certain spirit despite what some might consider a harsher quality of life than in the U.S.?

Cubans have an indomitable spirit. Though they make do with very little, family ties are close, and simple pleasures are savored. A walk with a sweetheart along the "malecon," Havana's waterfront, or sitting under a shade tree around a plaza while listening to live music – these are but two examples of how Cubans seem to enjoy daily life despite economic hardship.

Both of your visits to Cuba were academic in nature. This time you joined the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) in attending the International Congress of Higher Education. Can you talk about the panel you served on during that conference?

Cuba greatly values education, and this conference dealt with issues facing colleges and universities around the world. My panel specifically pointed to the types of partnerships that currently exist between Maryland's public universities and their Cuban counterparts, and, importantly, how we might build upon these in the future. Many universities around the globe have partnerships with the University of Havana, but Cuban institutions outside of Havana have great interest in working with us.

You also were representing the University System of Maryland. What opportunities for collaborations in higher education may exist between our state or our nation, and Cuba?

The opportunities are endless, and the desire on the part of Cubans for faculty and student exchanges is strong. But there are very real fiscal issues that will prove to be an impediment for Cubans who may wish to come here. As for those of us who are fortunate enough to go to Cuba, the lack of adequate internet access precludes the types of research and general communications to which our academic communities are accustomed.

How did your fluency in Spanish and scholarship in Latin American literature help you connect with the Cuban people?

The Cuban people are very friendly, and they absolutely burst into smile when they hear my fluent Spanish. Speaking the language is obviously an enormous advantage, opening doors to new relationships and providing the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding, whether of academics or political realities. The average Latin American perceives U.S. citizens as being very ethnocentric, so they are surprised to learn of an American university president who is well-versed in their societal realities and culture.

What else did you do while in Cuba? What were some of the takeaways?

My trip was brief and mostly focused on the conference. But, since I had been to Havana previously, I did spend part of a day playing tour guide to a number of AASCU colleagues. We toured Old



Havana, including a visit to the hotel Ambos Mundos, where Ernest Hemingway wrote a number of novels.

Currently, SU has study abroad agreements with institutions in a number of countries. Now that the trade restrictions between the U.S. and Cuba have been relaxed, do you think there is a possibility of a similar arrangement being made there?

I believe so. A number of Salisbury University faculty and staff may join me in the fall for a trip to Cuba, where we hope to explore a relationship between SU and the University of Matanzas, about an hour outside Havana.

Having seen Cuba's infrastructure first-hand, how do you think the relaxed trade restrictions might impact that country or the U.S.?

While the Obama administration has relaxed some travel and trade restrictions, the embargo largely remains in place, and travel for tourism purposes is still prohibited. Things may open up and change quickly, but by no means is travel easy in Cuba. Roads outside the capital are poor and poorly marked. Credit cards issued by U.S. banks are not accepted.

Internet and cell phone connectivity are limited. Cuba's main international airport is not ready for large numbers of visitors to the country. Once these types of issues are resolved, both the U.S. and Cuba will benefit, economically and politically.

Based on your experiences, what was the Cubans' overall impression of Raul Castro? And Fidel?

Cubans seem to be downright apathetic about Raul. But most venerate Fidel, especially the less economically fortunate. They see Fidel as a man who came from a wealthy, privileged family, but who committed his life to improving the lot of the average Cuban. Some, perhaps much, of that feeling is clearly the result of 60 plus years of Castro government propaganda. By cutting all ties with the Castro government in 1959-60, the U.S. set the stage for Cuba's revolution to turn socialist and for the Castro government to blame the country's woes on the U.S. embargo. Still, the Cuban people see this as political squabble and are very friendly toward the American people. Most Cubans hunger for closer relationships.

Are there lessons for Americans from Cuba and its history?

Yes, I think so. People in countries around the world want self-determination and will resist having their economies or their governments controlled by an outside, more powerful nation.

The U.S. is a multicultural nation. What might we learn from the Cuban people and our neighbors to the south?

Many of the problems we face here in the United States are due to a lack of familial cohesiveness, a lack of basic values. This, in turn, leads to a lack of resilience when hardships arise, which they invariably do. We seem to have lost sight of the importance of certain principles – kindness toward others, concern for the less fortunate, a belief in working toward community and societal goals. It's also important that we learn from others, celebrating our differences as well as our commonalities.

Your interest in Cuba has spanned more than four decades. Do you have any plans to return?

I do hope to. As stated earlier, there may be opportunities with the University of Matanzas or other Cuban universities. Cubans are eager for these exchanges, and we can learn from them, as well.