

CUBA SI; BLOQUEO NO!

by Barbara Humphrey

Recently, I traveled to Cuba with the Venceremos Brigade. Here is my story.

Ninety miles from the US border—but since 1959, US citizens cannot travel freely to Cuba. In 1969, a group of Americans formed the Venceremos (“We Shall Overcome”) Brigade (VB), an act of collective solidarity with Cuba’s revolution and right to self-determination and in defiance of US travel bans and economic blockade. The VB has brought thousands of people to Cuba, at times traveling via third countries and once by cattle boat, to fulfill the VB goals of supporting the Cuban people through voluntary labor (in the early years cutting cane with Fidel) and donations of material aid, entering into dialogue and relationship building with the Cuban people, learning from each other to change US’ Cuban policy and build a more just and equitable world.

In celebration of its 50th anniversary, the 2019 VB brought the largest and most diverse brigade to Cuba. We came in defiance of newly enacted US travel bans to breathe the free air that is Cuba. Passengers applauded when our plane touched down in Havana; the flight crew saluted as we boarded a bus to the terminal. Upon arrival, I understood that Cuba is a special place—a place that stood up to US empire and is still standing; where revolution is not a single act, but a constant struggle—it was a life changing transformation.

We drove from the airport on roads shared with buses, bicyclists, donkey carts, and pedestrians to the Cuban Institute for Friendship with the Peoples camp, constructed to host solidarity delegations such as ours. Upon arrival, we were

oriented to all things big and small—the food, the water, the toilets (no paper in the toilets—fish it out if you forget), 90+ degree bunkhouses, our fellow brigadistas and camp personnel, and especially the Cuban people, showing gratitude for accepting us onto their land.

Days were programmed from sunrise to past sunset with meetings, discussions,



Writing on a building in Cuba that translates to “Another world is possible.”
Photo: VB4Cuba.com

travel, work and play. We worked in the fields and at the camp. We visited with veterans of the revolution; government officials; and health care professionals producing medicinals from botanicals. We met with NGO representatives involved in women’s issues, housing, and race relations. We visited Havana and the Museum of the Revolution on July 26, Cuba’s national holiday commemorating Fidel’s failed attack on the Moncada barracks in 1953 that sparked the successful revolution less than six years later. And we played in the tropical waters of Varadero Beach.

From toileting to field work, bunkhouses to Havana, beans and rice meals to sparkling tropical waters, it is the Cuba experience. It is free people sharing in abundance when times are good and accepting austerity when they aren’t.

The veterans spoke with pride about their roles in the revolution. They freed their country from a ruthless dictator and US control and restored rule of law. They fought; they killed; they saw comrades die. Yet, they do not suffer from PTSD. Could PTSD, and its sister, moral injury, result from being ashamed of your service, from being on the wrong side of history?

Despite permitting only the Communist Party, Cuba is a grassroots, people-driven democracy. In their local Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, people develop their agendas, and more than 90% vote in elections. Candidates do not need to belong to the Communist Party, do not campaign, and serve without compensation to fulfill the peoples’ agendas. Fidel, and later Raul, ruled without opposition not as dictators but as the embodiment of the revolution.

My transformative moment came when we discussed US/Cuba bi-lateral relations. After 200 years of US dominance, everything changed in 1959. The US ramped up its “regime change war” via invasion, assassination attempts on Fidel’s life, and the blockade, preventing exports of cash goods and importation of vital necessities.

The US took advantage of a weakened Cuba after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 by imposing harsher economic sanctions and travel bans via the 1992 Cuba Democracy Act and 1996 Libertad Act (aka Helms Burton). White House advisors like John Bolton and Marco Rubio influenced US-Cuban policy, claiming Cuba had weapons of mass destruction and blaming the Cuban government for the country’s hardships. Relations improved under Obama (Cuban Thaw,) but deteriorated significantly under Trump, with new travel restrictions, and, for the first time, enforcing Title III of Helms Burton, giving jurisdiction to US courts to allow Americans who lost

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Barbara Humphrey is a long time socialist and anti-war activist and one-time Green Party candidate for the Syracuse Board of Education.

business resources to Cuban nationalization in 1959 to sue non-US companies benefitting from the use of those resources, such as suing foreign cruise lines for docking in the port of Havana. A recent report to the UN General Assembly claimed the US economic blockade has caused US\$138 billion in losses to Cuba since 1960, but that “the US will get no political concession from the Cuban government. They have failed for six decades and they will continue to fail.” The revolution lives on.

I learned that the 60-year US blockade wreaking havoc on Cuba is based upon this big lie: because Cuba is a communist/socialist dictatorship, it is evil; must cease to exist and must become a capitalist democracy. This is the truth: Cuba is a grassroots socialist democracy. Cuba is only evil if guaranteed housing, work, education and free universal healthcare are evil. The 1959 revolution lives in the hearts and minds of the Cuban people, and I believe they would fight to the death to oppose US-led regime change.

What an incredible time to be in Cuba—the 60th anniversary of the revolution and two months after the new travel bans and economic sanctions. We lived the scarcities imposed by the blockade, but not as severe as the scarcities being lived by the Cuban people. Housing is in desperate need of repair, but there are no funds for reconstruction. The electric grid is primarily powered by oil because Cuba lacks the resources to convert to renewable solar and wind energy.

Cuba’s response to US efforts for “a peaceful transition to representative democracy and a market economy” (aka regime change) is survival. While US politicians continue to promote the “big lie,” the American and Cuban people keep the door open to the truths that counter that falsehood. It is the responsibility of the truth seers to become truth-tellers.

The 26 of July Movement and its 1959 revolution live beyond the deaths of its leaders in the Cuban people. They ask the US for dignity and respect, but not at the cost of political and economic control. It is now my passion to spread these truths and to grow my passion in others to do everything you can to expose the big lie and oppose the blockade: join Cuba solidarity groups, read *History Will Absolve Me* by Fidel Castro, join the 51st VB and travel to Cuba, open yourself to truth and truth-telling. ☮

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ACTIVIST APPRECIATION: ELINOR CRAMER

Elinor made a decision a few years ago that learning about the history, values and culture of the people of the Onondaga Nation and other Haudenosaunee peoples was something she wanted and needed to do. She joined NOON’s Steering Committee and began to ask questions, read background information, and volunteered for several things right away—she even took minutes at her first NOON meeting! She quickly became involved with helping to organize our Indigenous People’s Day Speakout and Celebration; which was not an easy thing to do.

Elinor has a ‘can do’ attitude, smiles easily and is not afraid to jump in and help wherever she sees a need. She was instrumental this fall in bringing the Witness to Injustice/KAIROS Blanket Exercise to the Plymouth Church Community where she was a member. Because of her efforts and steady advocacy there, we were able to help 30 more people, including the Mayor of Syracuse, learn about the Doctrine of Discovery, the boarding schools and the attempted genocide of Indigenous Peoples of Turtle Island.

Thank you Elinor for your humor, hard work and steady commitment to making our world a better place.

– Cindy Squillace



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