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CUNY Librarians in Cuba

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PEER TO PEER REVIEW BY WILLIAM “BILL” BLICK

CUNY Librarians in Cuba

On January 15, a team of bold, innovative librarians from the City University of New York (CUNY) set out to do what many librarians in the United States have not: travel to Cuba for a weeklong expedition of cultural, professional, and informational exchange. The mission was as exhilarating as it was challenging.

I was among the ten librarians in the delegation representing a wide range of backgrounds and skills. Most of us did not know one another previously, and the potluck of talent was a unique aspect of the trip. Throughout the journey, members demonstrated a spirit of adventure and wonder and the desire to connect with Cuban information professionals and absorb the culture as best they could.

THE LIBRARIES

Although a Third World country lacking in many of the resources of other nations, Cuba features a unique spirit born of its people's ingenuity, warmth, and pride. This was particularly evident with the informational professionals, archivists, and librarians we met. We visited the University of Havana and were greeted with enthusiasm. We toured the campus, which was elaborately laid out to reflect reverence for higher education. Then we visited the library, followed by presentations from the librarians from the university. We then exchanged ideas and revealed the functionality of Academic Works, CUNY's own institutional repository,

Havana University Library also “has a room of rare books that holds 8,000 titles with 10,000 copies in its collection available to users in the hall of rare books. It receives an average of 150 users [daily] who use their services and facilities” (quoted from the university's website). There is evidence of the investment and encouragement of education and libraries in Cuba. One need only see the finely established library to see that Cuban education and literacy are taken seriously. Also worthy of note is the support and emphasis on open access. This ideal is

not taken for granted at the institution, as the librarians and faculty try to make their scholarship as readily available to the research community as is possible with their resources.

Havana University Library tries to make every effort to keep up technologically with other universities. It has 50 computers with Internet access, although the access is slow. It also has an updated website and is fastidiously working on digitization projects. All librarians have faculty status. The similarities and congruence of our beliefs, professional ideals, duties, and responsibility resonated throughout the visit.

One of the most interesting institutions that we visited was the José Martí National Library, an impressive 17-story building. We met with the library director, the children's librarian, and the adult services librarian. Across from the Plaza de la Revolución, the administrative center where many Cubans gathered for lengthy speeches by Fidel Castro, the Biblioteca is more than a little prominent and essential to this landscape. The library holds 20 million books and implements numerous programs to engage readers of all ages. However, due to lack of funding and resources, librarians, like all Cuban citizens, are forced to make do with what they have.

Other sites included the Museum of Literacy, which celebrates the yearlong campaign in the early 1960s when Cuba waged war against illiteracy and won. Castro vowed to eliminate illiteracy and employed educators and methodologies to teach people to read. We met with the director of the museum, who was very proud of the campaign and very enthusiastic about the results. We watched *Maestra*, a documentary by American documentarian Catherine Murphy, which is essential viewing for anyone interested in this movement.

We also visited institutions that were relevant to our mission, including the National Archive and the Art Museum Library. Again, dedicated and responsible representatives greeted us as we observed the infrastructure of these important

institutions. It should be noted that the archival material was not open to the general public. To view any document, it is necessary to submit to the government a specialized letter from your organization. Unfortunately, most of the documents and information are inaccessible to visitors without the required paperwork.

THE CULTURE

In addition to liaising with information professionals, we also had the chance to taste and savor the flavor of Cuba. Cubans are very civic and community minded, as evidenced in some of their programs, such as the “Arte Corte,” a hairdressing salon that is also an “interactive museum” in which customers, while comfortably seated in a 100-year-old chair awaiting their turn, may view antique scissors, razors, mirrors, vials, shaving brushes, combs, brushes, and advertisements, along with original paintings and drawings by Cuban artists, all focusing on the topic of hairdressing (per www.lahabana.com/guide/arte-corte-papitos). It is an inventive resource that serves several purposes: it hosts a training program for students to learn the business of haircutting, it serves as cultural artifact, and it provides a service for people in the area. Arte Corte is a perfect example of how Cubans find multilevel purposes for many things and often put their limited resources to good use.

THE BROAD VIEW

As librarians, information professionals, archivists, and protectors of the word, most of us strive for the “broad view.” We try to break down barriers, to reach for an ideal while dealing with real-world practicalities. In Cuba, we had many opportunities to see the broad view of our profession at work. Reaching out to future colleagues, comparing notes and methodologies, examining the different library spaces—these are all ways of thinking outside the box and examining the global impact of information and our profession. I, for one, think we made some progress, and I was fortunate to be a part of it.

“Imagine a library”

When Jennifer Gunter King became the Johnson Library director in 2012, some of her earliest conversations focused on how the library could play a central role in recruiting and retaining students. Hampshire's innovative academic support services and advising programs were geographically spread out, and King made it clear, she told *LJ*, “that the library is really where those resources

should be brought together.” That idea led to an invitation from the college administration to develop a proposal for a learning commons. King envisioned nonlibrary resources working alongside research librarians, archivists, media specialists, and instructional technology educators, and the administration was receptive.

As part of the schoolwide strategic planning process, King and the library

were asked to develop a proposal that would both work toward the college's academic mission and serve as a pilot for similar models at the other schools, which, with Hampshire, make up the Five Colleges—Amherst College, Smith College, Mount Holyoke College, and the University of Massachusetts Amherst—and beyond.

Hampshire administration helped King identify a cross-section of faculty,

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