

perspective

Cuba in Castro's shadow

By James Mejia

Posted: 04/05/2009 12:30:00 AM MDT

Since ousting the Batista government in January 1959, Fidel Castro's Cuba has outlasted 10 U.S. presidents. However, given Castro's age and illness, his transfer of power to his younger brother Raúl, and the election of Barack Obama, the only thing certain about Cuba's future is that it will change.

Already, we have seen some policies amended and some restrictions lifted in respect to relations between the United States and Cuba. Americans have the unique opportunity at this historic point in time to join with our elected officials and exert influence over the process of change, as citizen diplomats. Recently, I joined a group of 11 Denverites who did just that.

Our group visited Cuba during the 50th anniversary of the revolution through the PhilanthroTravel Division of Project C.U.R.E., a Denver-based nonprofit that is one of the largest in the world delivering medical supplies and equipment to developing countries. Joining me in the excursion were several of Denver's business and community leaders, from presidents and

CEOs of major foundations and other nonprofits to practicing physicians and business owners.

Our group accompanied Dr. Douglas Jackson, president and CEO of Project C.U.R.E., and Leanna Clark, executive director of Project C.U.R.E.'s PhilanthroTravel Division, to this island nation just 45 minutes from Miami — yet a world away.

A significant part of our itinerary included confirming the arrival of cargo containers that Project C.U.R.E. delivered to the coastal town of Baracoa. The tiny, remote town, ravaged by hurricanes Ike and Gustav, is a forgotten corner of the world. Walking along the streets near the shore, all that remained of many once-large buildings and small family homes are concrete foundations. The hospital staff in this achingly beautiful village kept their cherished supplies from Project C.U.R.E. locked in a warehouse until we arrived. They were determined to show us that our donations had made it to their destination.

"It's very rare that you actually see and speak with beneficiaries of charitable programs, but with this trip, you saw both the impacts and the potential for continuing work," said Linda Kanamine, vice president of public affairs, marketing and government affairs for HealthONE, and one of our trip participants.

We heard how the equipment from previous Project C.U.R.E. deliveries had been put to use. For example, the hospital director in Baracoa explained that a defibrillator had arrived only 20

days before the visit, but doctors had already used it to save three people. With the assistance of the Boulder Cuba Sister Cities organization, mammography machines were donated to hospitals in Guantanamo and Baracoa. Previously, only one unit was available for the region's 500,000 women.

The stories are endless, and the need immense. The hospital staff's ebullience at things we take for granted — crutches, sutures, syringes and latex gloves — drove home the great need for medical supplies and health care services, especially in rural Cuba. We saw the same need in Santiago, Guantánamo, Matanzas and even Havana.

There was no animosity from the Cuban people toward us. Instead, we were thanked for our generosity and were met with curiosity about the U.S. way of life. We heard a desire to travel and discover life outside of Cuba, especially from younger people. With no memory of how the revolution may have affected their families, these young Cubans thirst for information and the chance to improve their lives.

For some in our group, the connection to the Cuban people went deeper. Jeremy Anderson, of BNY Mellon Wealth Management, is the first person in his family to return to Cuba since 1956. He visited with great aunts and cousins who he had only known by name and perhaps a dated photograph. Their conversations have led to e-mails and phone calls, and the reunification of his family.



Left: James Mejía and Christine Benero visit a home that belonged to her family before the revolution.

Despite policies that divide our two countries, many Americans and their families retain historical and emotional ties that unite them with the Cuban people. On the first Project C.U.R.E. trip to Cuba, Elaine Gantz Berman, a member of the Colorado Board of Education, re-established a connection with the country. "Cuba, where my mom was born and my grandfather buried, has very special meaning to my family," she said. "Our trip to Cuba with Project C.U.R.E. brought together my husband's medical interests, our mutual philanthropic goals, and the very personal and emotional connection with my roots."

Maria Garcia Berry, CEO of CRL Associates, also visited Cuba on Project C.U.R.E.'s previous trip. As a child, she was flown out of Havana to Miami through Operation Peter Pan, a project that allowed parents to send more than 14,000 children from Cuba to Miami between 1960 and 1962.

For Christine Benero, president and CEO of Mile High United Way, our time in the Miramar neighborhood of Havana created mixed feelings. Christine had the address of the home that belonged to her family before the revolution. The people who live there today know nothing of her family, or that Christine is helping to improve the quality of health care in their community through her support of Project C.U.R.E.

Groups of U.S. citizens like ours travel to Cuba every year under legal visas for education, arts, agriculture and humanitarian causes. We encountered members of a Chicago church who



Above: Caz Matthews, president of Wellpoint Foundation, views boxes of medical supplies delivered by Project C.U.R.E. to the general hospital in Baracoa -- a small town on the eastern tip of Cuba, hard hit by tidal waves resulting from recent hurricanes.

were building houses and a group of Oregon businessmen selling agricultural equipment. We saw first-hand that, despite any government policy, personal relationships overcome obstacles in improving the human condition.

Project C.U.R.E.'s work in Cuba began in 1997 with deliveries of medical supplies to hospitals in Havana, Matanzas and Pinar del Rio. With distribution and collection centers across the United States, Project C.U.R.E. receives hundreds of thousands of dollars of donated medical supplies and equipment from manufacturers, distributors and hospitals.

Since reviving its work in Cuba in 2006, Project C.U.R.E. has delivered five containers of medical supplies, each valued at \$400,000 wholesale, to various hospitals and clinics in Cuba. Three more are planned for delivery later this year.

After seeing first-hand the impact that Project C.U.R.E. can have on medical professionals and the patients under their care, I gained a more intimate understanding of the organization's day-to-day work. "Project C.U.R.E. is a living example for those of us who care about changing lives not only in our community, but across the world," Benero said. "We saw first-hand how a simple act can make a huge difference."

James Mejia is CEO of Denver Preschool Program, created in November 2006 as a result of a voter-approved ballot initiative to increase the number of children attending a high-quality preschool program before entering kindergarten.



Doctors examine a young patient at the pediatrics hospital in Santiago de Cuba.



Participants in Project C.U.R.E.'s recent humanitarian trip to Cuba were, left to right, back row: Héctor González Pérez, Dr. Julio Pita, Jamie VanLeeuwen, Dr. Lisa Latts, Jeremy Anderson, James Mejía, Dr. Doug Jackson. Left to right, front row: Linda Kanamine, Christine Benero, Yvette Pita Frampton, Caz Matthews, Leanna Clark.