

By Matthew Walsh

When Mr. Calagione first mentioned the prospect of visiting Cuba in the spring of 2017, I was dubious. Although in 2014 President Obama had shown signs of improving diplomatic relations with Cuba, I had believed that American travel to Cuba would have to wait some years. The opportunity to immerse myself in the culture of Cuba, a country impoverished by many regimes of cruel dictators and gripped by the historical intervention of the United States and the Soviet Union intrigued me, but I never considered Mr. Calagione's idea to visit Cuba as a realistic proposal. It was not until Mr. Calagione gathered all members of the baseball team in October when the prospect of visiting Cuba became legitimate. The appearance of the word "Cuba" on that piece of paper immediately enlivened me. While I looked forward to playing baseball, enjoying the warm weather, and interacting with locals using my Spanish, the learning aspect of the trip was what excited me the most. The historical context of Cuba from colonialism to the revolution created a unique social, cultural, and political landscape that I was excited to learn about. My eagerness to learn about the livelihoods of those with different social and cultural background often drove me to engage in what I call "research frenzies": the hectic act of researching a topic of interest by delving into articles, videos, and photos on the internet using more than thirty tabs. This was often a time consuming (and battery consuming) endeavor that acted in place of actual traveling, and it fulfilled my desire to learn about other cultures. I would always choose travel over feverishly scouring the internet, so the opportunity to visit Cuba for a week energized me.

There are few places in the world where I would tolerate a seven hour bus ride before a four hour flight in order to reach the destination. Cuba is one of those places. When I arrived at the athletic circle just before 7:00, I ignored my drowsiness because of my excitement to go to Cuba, and this eagerness never died until halfway through the flight when I realized that I had left something crucial at the airport. I immediately became miserable, frantically brooding over how I could fare on the trip without that piece of baseball equipment. This distress did not relent when I arrived in Cuba or at the resort in Varadero: my mood did not improve until I arrived at the baseball stadium in the morning in Matanzas, Cuba, a city of 150,000 with a rich history of art, baseball, and colonialism. The atmosphere stood in sharp contrast with that of American baseball: as the Cuban team underwent their very methodical warm up regime, I was mesmerized by the surroundings of the field. The words "Yo soy Fidel" were painted on the concrete wall in right center field, merengue music blared from the speakers, and horse drawn carriages and classic cars meandered through the narrow thoroughfare next to the field. Absorbing the ambience of the field distracted me from the anguish I had had the night before, and it lasted until I returned to the resort. The resort, with its amenities and general ease of living, resembled the sheltered life that I had lived in Massachusetts, so it was fertile ground for grief. Every night when I purchased wifi cards to receive one hour of internet access to contact my parents, the woe returned. However, once I exited the confines of the resort, my sorrow disappeared: Immersed in the culture of a foreign country, if I wanted to truly experience Cuban society, I would have no time for sadness. With the unique ability to experience both the confines of a resort filled with tourists and the harsh reality of Cuban life, I discovered that I enjoy cultural exchange more than beachside relaxation. Although I understand that not everyone is the same as I am, I encourage everyone to try to explore local culture at least a little if he/she is ever in a foreign country.

On Wednesday afternoon, after losing our third consecutive game against Matanzas, the spirit of the team was palpably low until we arrived at Maravillas de la Infancia, a small cultural arts school for

struggling children in Matanzas. Originally a social project, Maravillas de la Infancia, which translates to Wonders of Childhood, was built in a decrepit abandoned government building built by the Spanish many years ago. Although it has been greatly renovated since its inception, the school building was still crumbling. When I entered the school, I was amazed at the rather luxurious interior that was populated by artwork. Almost immediately, the students at Maravillas de la Infancia greeted us with seven performances of song and dance, each equally representative of the rich culture that has survived in Cuba in spite of the pervasive poverty and gross lack of individual liberties. Dancing with the Cuban students during our visit was an extraordinary experience as I truly experienced an aspect of Cuban life. Instead of being a passive viewer from the comfort of a tour bus, I gained a firsthand experience with locals that will be impossible to forget. Instead of trying to capture the essence of Cuban culture through a photograph, I experienced it.

On Thursday, instead of playing a game, our team participated in a clinic with some players from the Matanzas team and coaches of the Matanzas Cocodrilos, the professional team of the Matanzas province in Cuba. Aside from the energetic warm up routine, I noticed no striking differences between the way Americans and Cubans play baseball. Both countries stress the physical fundamentals of hitting, pitching, and fielding, and the Cuban drills resembled the ones I was accustomed to in America. The true cultural exchange on Thursday occurred when we invited the players from the Matanzas team back to the resort. Visibly struck by the bounty of food in the buffet, the Cuban players were guided around the resort by members of the St. Mark's baseball team. While conversing in Spanish with the Cuban players was an enjoyable and beneficial experience for me, the purpose of inviting the Cubans back to the resort was to give the Cubans a glimpse into American culture. It was a profound experience for the Cuban players who had nor the money nor the ability to experience other cultures. For this reason, it was on Thursday that I truly realized how fortunate I was.

Although a game was originally planned for Friday, due to a scheduling conflict, it was postponed until Saturday. With a free day on Saturday, Mr. Lyons planned an excursion into Havana via tour bus. Along with about half of the team, I visited Havana, the mecca of Cuban culture and history. Our knowledgeable tour guide, Santiago, provided our tour group with a historical background to each notable monument, museum, plaza, and square that we visited. While I enjoyed learning about the rich, detailed history of the island of Cuba, and I satisfied this interest by visiting a 17th century fort, a cathedral, museums, and seeing Fidel Castro's tank, I will more likely remember the stark contrast between the imposing Capitol building with its manicured lawns and the decrepit apartments across the street as that image truly represents the harshness of Cuban life. Likewise, the concept of the Cuban revolution fascinates me, but the formidable sculptures of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara inspired awe in me because of what they symbolized. Although from two starkly divergent historical contexts, Washington D.C. and Havana share striking similarities: their capital cities are both filled with national monuments. Two countries with dissimilar political structures both honor influential figures in their nation's past through monuments, teaching me a profound message on the treatment of history. Moreover, Santiago's candor surrounding the difficulty of Cuban life revealed his openness toward discussion with Americans, signalling that much of the disdain between Cubans and Americans has disappeared.

For our last game of the Cuba Goodwill Tour, we travelled to a small, well-kept baseball field enclosed in a cement wall in the small, poor village of Guanabana. While we played, a parent of one of the players on the Guanabana team offered fresh coconuts, and there was a plate of locally picked fruits

including guava and pineapple near the dugout. Spectators young and old, including dogs that wandered through the outfield, attended the game in Guanabana in spite of the lack of bleachers. After the game, the director of the Cuba Goodwill Tour program presented the Guanabana team with all of the donated equipment from the St. Mark's baseball team. With his coworkers, Dennis assorted the array of bats, gloves, cleats, pants, shirts, hats, and belts. Although the Cuba Goodwill Tour programs had endowed many Cuban teams in the Holguin and Matanzas provinces with much needed baseball equipment, they still lacked what most American teams consider necessary. The ability of the pastime of baseball to remain the passion of so many Cuban people and the relationships that we formed during the trip demonstrates its effectiveness as a diplomatic tool. Perhaps through baseball we can destroy any lingering enmity between Cuba and the United States.