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Sanctuary of Hope Takes A Group of Youth from South L.A. to Havana to Deliver Humanitarian Relief In Support of the Cuban People

Sanctuary of Hope's (SOH) Destinations program recently took a delegation to Cuba for an educational and humanitarian trip. The 18-person delegation comprised young people, staff, and board members engaged in a week of education and exploration about health and community care, arts and culture, and the impact of the United States blockade.

The delegation's education and humanitarian projects focused on two critical needs, medical and office supplies, and community resilience. In partnership with the non-profit, *Not Just Tourists*, the SOH delegation brought 12 suitcases filled with 30 pounds each of essential medical supplies for distribution to local hospitals and clinics. Additionally, they delivered two duffel bags filled with office and stationary supplies collected by SOH delegation members. The supplies were presented to Luisa Maria Gonzalez, Vice President of Presna Latina, a news agency in Cuba similar to the Associated Press.

"SOH's Destinations program is about exposing young people to the world and understanding their role as global citizens, said Janet Denise Kelly, Chief Executive Office of Sanctuary of Hope. "We want young people to think critically about intersectionality and interconnectivity and contribute to solutions in their communities and abroad related to what they've learned through these cultural exchanges about health and food access, education and literacy, and community resilience."

Described as an equity and solidarity trip, the delegation participated in six months of preparation and planning curated by Reverend Kelvin Sauls. Travel and logistical arrangements were coordinated by Juanita Palacios-Sims of Beyond Cuba Travel. Preparation activities included watching the Netflix docu-series "Cuba Libre", reading the book "Oshun's Calabash: Dancing Across Cuba into the Memory of the Embodies African Soul and Finding Home" by Dr. Iya Alisa Osunfunke Orduña. SOH also held three teach-in sessions with Dr. Bitá Amani from Charles Drew University of Medicine and Science, author Dr. Alisa Orduña and Dr. Rosemary Mealy, author, educator, and Board Member of the Interreligious Federation for Community Organizing (IFCO)/Pastor for Peace. In collaboration with the International Society of



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Black Latinos, SOH and the delegates hosted a Community Dialogue in South Los Angeles with a delegation from the Cuban Embassy.

“Utilizing a popular education model, the SOH Destinations program is a unique immersive leadership development program that invites our system-impacted young people to intentionally bridge with a people in a particular place, examine how their pain paved a path to renewed power and re-positioned purpose for bold and equitable belonging in the world,” says Reverend Kelvin Sauls, who has curated the experience, and facilitated sessions in Cuba. This is his third immersive experience with SOH. In previous experiences, the young people bridged with people in South Africa and Zimbabwe, and five southern States in the United States to examine the civil and human rights movement. “As a Board Member of IFCO/Pastors for Peace, I was excited to accompany this multigenerational delegation on yet another exhilarating exchange into a greater understanding of global solidarity, mutuality, intersectionality, and people-to-people diplomacy toward an equitable and normalized relationship between Cuba and the United States. Such an equitable and normalized relationship can only be realized by ending the unlawful, unfair, and unjust blockade,” Sauls stated.

The delegation engaged in various educational, cultural, and recreational activities with several communities in the western part of Cuba. The delegation rode in antique cars and visited the Nacional Hotel, old Havana, African Museum, the caves of the Indians in Viñales, Martin Luther King and Malcom X Park, and Centro Fidel Castro Ruz. They also took a tour of Las Terrazas, a biosphere reserve and self-sustainable community, and experienced an agricultural ranch for an immersion into farm-to-table practices.

In collaboration with the community engagement office at the University of Havana, the delegation also attended a multigenerational community arts celebration in Old Havana. The delegation’s experience at this community cultural event turned out to be very special because they met the first female veteran, featured in the docu-series “Cuba Libre,” to fight in the liberation of Angola.

“To know the Cuban people is to know how solidarity and strength continue to prevail in a country embellished with culture and antiquity,” expressed Aaminah Parker, a recent graduate of California State University Dominguez Hills.”

Deep dialogues for greater understanding abound! The delegation had conversations with historical figures, religious leaders, and American students studying medicine. In the Marianao district, the delegation had a dialogue with Reverend Idael Montero Pacheco, the current pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church and director of the Martin Luther King Center, and Reverend Raúl Suárez, Pastor Emeritus and Founder of the church and center. Another interchange was with American students studying medicine at the Latin American School of Medicine (ELAM). The students, of whom three recently graduated, shared about Cuba’s health care system, growing through the COVID-19 pandemic, their personal and professional development, and preparation for medical residency upon returning to the United States. “Listening to the doctors speak about their program was a great experience; and I was really interested



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in their perspectives on Cuba. I especially enjoyed hearing one of the doctors was from Carson,” said Dwayne Gill, a student at California State University Dominguez Hills.

Prior to leaving Cuba, the local newspaper *Periodista Grunma* interviewed members of the delegation about the trip and the experience in Cuba.

“Cuba was a wonderful experience that opened my eyes to a different way of living communally,” said Sharron Hillery, SOH Board Chair. “I believe youth on this Destinations trip enjoyed the multigenerational mentorship and permanent connections formed with our Board.”

The SOH delegation will prepare a community report-back event for the trip in September and participate in various presentations with community groups to share reflections.

“Cuba embraced me,” said Alaysia Washington, a Certified Nurse’s Assistant planning to advance her nursing credentials. “It gave me love. It gave me life. Cuba shares its beauty with intensity and candidness. Its people are prideful, yet healthy and full of youth. “

Given its many historical complexities, contemporary complications, and the devastating impact of the United States blockade, the entire delegation embraced the opportunity to grapple with these issues by continuing to develop their critical thinking about comparative models of education and healthcare, perspectives on individual liberty and governance, and the power of embracing the depth and breadth of arts and culture. The delegation was inspired by the acceptance, resilience and reimagination of the Cuban people, who they endearingly call, “Cuban kinfolk.”

About Sanctuary of Hope

Sanctuary of Hope (SOH) provides housing and education stabilization services to vulnerable youth and young adult populations between the ages of 16-25, who are homeless, foster care, at-promise, or low-income in South Los Angeles and the South Bay. The agency has served over 6,000 youth since 2010 through their basic needs, housing, and education support programs.



PHOTOS



SOH Youth Leaders L to R: Nathan Patterson, Emery Hooks, Derianna Johnson, Janet Kelly, Amiyah Parker, Alaysia Washington Zajah Phillips and Dwayne Gill



SOH Destinations Delegation at LAX preparing to depart for Havana, Cuba for educational, cultural and humanitarian encounter with the Cuban people.



SOH Destinations Delegation in conversation with the Rev. Idael Montero Pacheco, Pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Havana, Cuba



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Delivering Stationary Supplies to the Cuban News Agency, Prensa Latina. Pictured L to R: Janet Kelly, Executive Director, SOH; Luisa María González, Vice President, Prensa Latina; Nathaniel Patterson, SOH Youth Leader, Sharron Hillery, SOH Board Chair, Kayla Bennett, SOH Staff and Shannon Murray, SOH Board Member



Recreation and exploration of an agricultural ranch for immersion into farm-to-table practices and horse riding. Pictured: SOH Youth Leaders: Alaysa Washington, Nathaniel Patterson, Dwayne Gill and SOH Staff, Mason Way



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Delivering Medical Supplies to the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. Community Center in the Pogolotti, Marianao community of Havana. Pictured are SOH Destinations Delegation to Cuba with Rev. Idael Montero Pacheco, Pastor at Ebenezer Baptist Church and MLK Community Center Director.



City Tour of Havana in Antique Cuban Cars along the longest bench in the world, "The Havana Malecón.