

Cuba Is Changing

Vail Daily Column, Dec. 27, 2013

by Wayne Trujillo, Director of Communications, Chamber of the Americas

An apparently polite and perfunctory presidential encounter at Nelson Mandela's memorial became more than a mere handshake. Not only did President Barack Obama shake Raul Castro's hand, but he also shook the Beltway and blogosphere, ironically and metaphorically giving pause to those with sanitary concerns about casual and calculated handshakes. This one did indeed go viral. The handshake grabbed the synoptic attention spans that comprise the Internet, inciting gobs of Google returns and emotional comments.

While some pundits and politicians consider President Obama's acknowledgement of Cuba's leader either a pragmatic grasp of diplomacy or merely a funereal formality, others lambasted the palming as insouciance, if not actually a tacit high five, to tyranny and thuggery. While the presidential handshake may have meant nothing more than a spontaneous greeting without forethought or consequence, the possibility exists that the gesture subtly acknowledged that our Cuban policy, codified through ostracism and various legislative measures through the years, has likely delayed rather than hastened Cuban democracy.

One thing is certain. Cuba is changing.

Last month, I traveled to Cuba on the Chamber of the Americas Cuban Cultural/Educational mission trip. Arturo Lopez-Levy, a Cuban native and doctoral candidate at the University of Denver's Korbel School of International Studies, guided the mission, introducing us to Cuban artists, musicians, academics, students, bloggers, activists, religious leaders and budding entrepreneurs. The introductions were more than an exchange of handshakes and pleasantries. We engaged in spirited and freewheeling discussions about socioeconomic and political challenges that would've been impossible even a decade ago. Actually, finding a budding entrepreneur in Cuba a decade ago would've been impossible. A recent *New York Times*' article explored the Cuban government's gradual and limited shifts and allowances, quoting our tour organizer, Lopez-Levy, on the intricacies the Cuban government and reformists navigate on the delicate dance to a destination even remotely considered a full-fledged free democracy. Cuba's limited freedoms and private proprietorships appear more of an amateur dress rehearsal than the world premiere of a polished production on any stage of the global economy.

Chamber of the Americas' Cuban mission exposed both the holdouts and the passing of Castro's communist Cuba. While the government's economic reforms and expanded freedoms and allowances appear slow, even begrudging, the newfound permissiveness appears everywhere every day. The Cuban government's long-awaited surrender won't come courtesy of military strikes or economic embargos, but through pragmatism and compromise. Democratic and economic reform will occur through evolution rather than revolution.

The broad American perception of Cuba is that of an anachronistic government and country; exiled to a bygone time and discarded ideology. The forbidden fruit allure and film noir

romanticism retain a potent pull on the American imagination through bohemian bromides and celluloid visages of Hemingway and fedoras, Ernesto "Che" Guevara and berets, and vintage automobiles last seen with regularity in the Eisenhower era. Remnants of those perceptions remain throughout Cuba, but the island nation has progressed past America's stereotypical imagination of Fulgencio Batista's decadence and Fidel Castro's severity. These days, Castro's sweeping and soaring sermons under the monumental pillar in Havana's Plaza de la Revolucion are seen and heard only on historical video and audio recordings; the state no longer has monolithic business and communication exchanges. Indeed, the general population eagerly trades words, goods and services with foreigners.

New Face of Cuba

Harold Cardenas Lema, a professor and blogger at La Joven Cuba, is one of those Cuban citizens eager to express opinions without restraint or limitations. He represents the new face of Cuba, an academic with limited means, opportunities and freedoms, but agitating for change and opportunities in ways that are more meaningful and effective than our isolation of the Cuban government and, by extension, its citizens. The setting of our meeting with Cardenas Lema also represented a shift in the Cuban socioeconomic and political topography. We met at a Paladar, a privately owned restaurant. Actually, the establishment was more of a movie-centric watering hole reminiscent of Hemingway's and Hollywood's ideated and idyllic Havana, replete with sketches and murals of Elizabeth Taylor and Marilyn Monroe that would fit in SoHo or LoDo. The location and setting represented Cuba's gradual transition, situated on the cusp of Havana and Hollywood; communism and capitalism.

If the ambiance, location and nature of the Paladar herald an evolution rather than a revolution in Cuba, Cardenas Lema personifies it. His words, written and spoken with insistent passion, push past the eroding strictures and limitations of Cuban discourse. Cardenas Lema will win his war with words rather than weapons. He displays frustration, impatience and hope in equal measures. Like other Cubans I met, the possibility of relations with America excites him, including the prospect of collaboration between the Chamber of the Americas and La Joven Cuba.

Whatever the motivations and implications of the controversial handshake at the Mandela memorial, a generous interpretation foretells increased American relations with a Cuban democracy led by people such as Cardenas Lema and influenced by his passion and persistence.

Wayne Trujillo, Director of Communications for the Chamber of the Americas, is a Minturn native and Battle Mountain High School graduate. His family moved to Eagle County nearly a century ago. His uncle, Oscar Meyer, was the Eagle County sheriff gunned down by James Sherbondy on Tennessee Pass in 1937, and his Aunt Ollie Meyer was Eagle County superintendent of schools. His grandparents, Irene and Ralph Meyer, moved to Minturn in the 1940s and owned and operated Meyer's Garage. He currently lives in Denver.