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March 2011

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Cuba offers more than 'sports for all'

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March 25, 2011

Contributed

Elderly members of the community in Havana, Cuba, join in tai chi. The tai chi masters were very welcoming and helped a group of 15 University of Western Ontario kinesiology students and professor Darwin Semotiuk to learn how to properly practice the discipline.

During spring break, a group of 15 University of Western Ontario kinesiology students and professor Darwin Semotiuk headed off to Havana, Cuba, for an experience of a lifetime as part of an academic course entitled, *An Educational Exploration of Sport and Physical Activity in Cuba*.

Before our departure, we were excited for our trip, as we have seen many pictures of the places where we would be visiting, but we had no idea what it would be like to be immersed in the Cuban culture for 10 days. We went on this trip to bring some humanitarian donations and to learn about the Cuban “sport for all” mentality, but we learned so much more than that.

The “sport for all” mentality is based on Fidel Castro’s idea every Cuban citizen should have the right to participate in sport and physical activity, regardless if you are a child or an elderly individual. This philosophy was implemented after the Cuban revolution of 1959. To experience this “sport for all” approach and the Cuban culture, our trip consisted of visiting Old Havana City, taking in a baseball game, a visit to a daycare centre and primary school, going to high performance centres and participating in early-morning community activities with the elderly.

Havana was breath-taking to say the least. We were all amazed by the beautiful architecture of the old buildings, but couldn’t help noticing the lack of paint, upkeep and general maintenance. Walking along the Plaza de San Francisco, we were approached by street dancers on stilts singing Cuban music. They incorporated us into their performance, and we happily danced along. This was just the beginning of the dancing and singing that went on during our stay in Havana.

To fully immerse ourselves in Cuban culture, we watched a baseball game at the Changa Mederos Stadium. We watched an extra-inning win by the underdog team, the Metropolitanos, against the older, more experienced team, Santiago de Cuba. Though the game was exciting, the crowd alone was a unique experience. Everyone in the stadium was dancing and chanting in the aisles, including the young children.

One of the highlights of the trip for many of us was visiting the daycare centre and primary school. At the daycare centre, we saw the young children participate in co-ordination activities and dances they had learned. We were all impressed with the good behavior of these children. Our visit to the primary school could only be described as amazing. The highlight of this visit was our participation in their physical education

program. We were able to play chess, volleyball, baseball or dance with the students. The young girls who were dancing were so polite and patient. These girls tried so hard to communicate with us despite the language barrier. Dana Poeta, Samantha Austin, Crystal Phelan and Stephanie Paplinskie spent time teaching these girls how to “dougie.”

The girls loved the dance and could not stop laughing at and with us.

We also had the privilege of visiting different high performance facilities throughout Havana, such as the National Gymnastics School, the Volleyball High Performance Center and Pan American Stadium. These facilities help generate the top athletes in the country and some of the best athletes in the world. At the Volleyball High Performance Center, we had the pleasure of speaking with Regla Torres, three-time Olympic gold medalist and one of the world’s best volleyball players of her time. As well, some of the students and their professor at the Pan American Stadium got to meet Dayron Robles, 110m hurdles Olympic gold medalist and current world champion and world-record holder.

Toward the end of the trip, we had the pleasure of taking part in some physical activities taking place in the community. One activity we participated was tai chi, which we did with some elderly members of the community. The tai chi masters were very welcoming and helped us to learn how to properly practice the discipline.

To finish off our trip we visited the Morro Castle where we ate a spectacular dinner, walked through the historic Park Morro Cabanas, and attended the nightly cannon ceremony. Standing atop the castle, overlooking the water and the city of Havana and watching the cannon ceremony was a wonderful way to say goodbye to Havana.

Our experience in Havana could not have been any more amazing. Our group was cohesive and eager to participate in everything we did. The opportunity we were given while in Havana was the experience of a lifetime.

This could not have been possible without professor Semotiuk, who has successfully arranged this opportunity year after year, as well as the financial support from the International Curriculum Fund (ICF) and the Faculty of Health Sciences Study Abroad Support Fund. A huge thank you goes out to all of those who provided us with donations to bring with us. INDER (Cuban Ministry of Sport) and the citizens of Havana were endlessly gracious for everything we brought them, and were kind and generous hosts. Thank you to the friends and remarkable people we met in Havana who made everything possible.