

Villagers Around the World: Our Holiday Trip to Cuba (cont'd)

by Eddy Perez

Talking to Cubans

Beyond the tourism that we all enjoyed, we learned about the emerging legal micro, small- and medium-sized private sectors in Cuba and its impact on the Cuban economy and the lives of a growing number of the Cuban population. Most Cubans we spoke with expressed concern about the failures of the centralized state-run economic model, made more fragile by the drop in economic support from the former Soviet Union and global economic sanctions led by the United States. The Cuban government struggles to provide basic food and medicine to the majority of its population—and is reportedly a driving force in the continued and growing exodus of Cubans from the island.

But during our trip, we found that there is hope and a better standard of living for the estimated 30 percent of the population now engaged in the private sector. We traveled with and through Cuba's small- and medium-private sector: Airbnbs, restaurants, clubs, cabarets, taxis, tour guides, farms, cigar makers, etc. Curiously, many people talked about President Obama's trip to Cuba in 2014 and how that visit led to the opening of the private sector economy. Very few Cubans talked about Fidel Castro and his historic impact on the country.

Most importantly for me, the trip reinforced my family's sense of its Cuban roots. I am proud that all of my children spoke Spanish—which they learned at Bancroft and Oyster—and how much they enjoyed the same lechon asado, rope vieja, congris and yuca that they had grown up eating with their "abuelos." The emotional highlight of the trip was the day our family, my dad's descendants, stood for a photograph in the same spot—in front of the Cuban Capitol building and a statue of Jose Martí—where my then-23-year-old dad, Américo Perez, stood for a photograph in 1947 the day he immigrated to New York City.

I'd be happy to chat with any Villagers about our trip or Cuban politics or just play dominoes. We can talk over coffee on Mt. Pleasant Street, or eat a Cuban sandwich at Mi Cuba Café in Columbia Heights.

January Board Notes + Introductions (cont'd)

by Bill Emmet

“Tess and I were both introduced to the key activities of the Village during Covid,” says Robin. “We were active in Neighbors Helping Neighbors,” the volunteer effort organized by the Village and the Advisory Neighborhood Commission, ANC-1D, on which Robin served through 2022. But Robin sees Covid as “an inflection point for the Village, and all these things came out of it: a lot more volunteer activity and a realization that there really are people in need in our community.”

As our society and economy learned to function despite Covid, NHN, the original Neighbors Helping Neighbors, was absorbed into the Village framework and managed by what is now called the Volunteer Management Committee. Tess and Robin both assumed very active roles in the VMC and continue to grapple with such challenges as volunteer supply and demand. They helped assemble a cadre of volunteers prepared to provide services to members, but very few requests now come in from existing Village members. This leaves volunteers frustrated by the lack of work, causing them to drift away, which, in turn, means there may be no volunteers available when requests are made.

When the Village movement started to take hold in communities across the country, one of its selling points was that the provision of in-home services by volunteers could help members stay in their homes—“age in place”—and continue to live meaningful lives in their chosen communities. Unsaid and perhaps initially disregarded in this equation is the quality that Robin, Tess, and many Mount Pleasant Village members see as the chief value of the Village. “Connection,” says Robin. “A sense of community,” adds Tess. “Belonging,” they both agree. It is to reflect this quality that “aging in community” has become a more common description of what our Village is about.

Much of our Village’s activity is directed towards forging connections, either with other members or with disparate parts of the Mount Pleasant community. Mount Pleasant residents appear to have a highly developed sense of service to the community, resulting in stepped-up outreach to other organizations serving people in the neighborhood and, indeed, to people living in Mount Pleasant who may not have the resources to meet their own needs. Similar energy goes into support of projects that can benefit the whole community while engaging a diverse group of participants. The now-annual neighborhood clean-up is one such event, but plenty of others are possible. “Who ever thought mulching would become such a big activity?” asks Robin.

In the end, both Robin and Tess recognize that there is great energy and willingness among Village members to get involved, and they see maintaining that enthusiasm as part of their job in the next couple of years. When members say, “let’s step up and think of things we can be doing,” they want the Village to be able to provide attractive and meaningful outlets and opportunities.

Yet, Robin and Tess also firmly believe there needs to be a balance in the Village’s activities. “We especially can’t forget the people living by themselves” whose needs are growing greater as they age, says Robin. That’s why Tess feels it’s “a priority to keep our

members active and engaged, because that's really a part of helping you age 'well'." We need to continue to focus on "programs that are important and interesting," she adds.

While the Village's activities are largely driven by the organization's various committees, one role of the leaders is to maintain a broad vision, a sense of direction that ensures coherence in the Village's offerings.

As Robin sees it, "the Village is a mechanism through which you can put together the right building blocks for you, as you age, to continue to be stimulated, motivated, and educated." The hope is that everybody can find something in the Village to keep them engaged. "We're meeting the needs of dozens of people who have very different needs" from one another but who find commonality in the connections the Village enables them to make. "In the best world, members can find support for whatever is important to them."

Robin and Tess both point to the variety of committees and interest groups that have sprung up in the Village. In addition to her work with the Volunteer Management Committee, Robin herself focuses on wellness activities and the opera interest group. "The opera group is the same small group of people, but it's great that it's there," she notes.

For both Tess and Robin, the Village's greatest challenge may be how to help community members stave off isolation and its consequences. This is a subject that has animated discussion within the VMC since it came together. "We don't know what we don't know," Tess observes. The very fact that someone is isolated means that person is harder to identify and engage. The Village's new leaders will continue to seek ways to get past these barriers. They realize that the "lack of asking for services" does not mean they're not needed by members of our community. Much of their attention in their new roles will be on trying to find the right pieces to solve this puzzle.

The President/Deputy President structure and relationship is new to our Village, and Robin and Tess know it will take some effort on their part to make it work. Each sees that it meets her personal needs; Tess is working and still has children in school, while Robin's attention is directed both to her aging mother and her two grandchildren, both of whom were born in 2023. Under the circumstances, neither felt able to take on the presidency alone.

Together, though, they feel excited to move ahead, and there is no doubt they feel the sense of connection that flows through Mount Pleasant Village. As Robin says to Tess, "I'm so grateful to you that you're doing this with me. It'll be fun instead of just nerve-wracking."

A Little Bit of Naples in Mount Pleasant (cont'd)

by David Arnold

Oliver chose the name Bar del Monte to honor the neighborhood. And don't think of it as another 2Amys, he says. "It's my own restaurant and it will be smaller and pared back from my father's restaurant. It will carry a smaller menu, more like a trattoria." Tables are pushed to the side of the restaurant but Oliver hopes to open in early February and as soon as city inspections are over, you'll find Oliver pulling hand-built Neopolitan pizzas from the trattoria's brick-fired oven. Oliver and his father bought the building about two years ago, stripped the interior, added another 60 square feet of dining space by moving the front wall to the sidewalk—a wall of paneled glass to brighten the interior—and designed a sparkling new pizzeria to serve 40 customers.



Oliver installed a tornado shelter for wine storage, a unique service!

It's a basic casual trattoria with a short menu always offering the classic pizzas of Naples, the Margherita with buffalo mozzarella and basil and tomato sauce or the Marinara with dried oregano, garlic and tomato sauce, and a changing daily menu of fresh pastas, simple grilled meats and fish. Oliver also shipped in a Bosco espresso machine from Naples.

Behind the five-stool bar the staff will serve two beers on tap, one Italian and a rotation of local D.C. brews. The wine offerings will come from most of Italy's regions, stored in a tornado shelter from Arkansas that is already buried in the trattoria's backyard patio at a comfortable 55 degrees.

Talking Diversity: Our Neighbors in The Woodner (cont'd)

by Rick Reinhard

Judy got to know several of the union's leaders and in April 2023 Judy invited them to participate in a very successful joint diversity–membership tabling event in front of BestWorld. They enthusiastically accepted.

Through these activities and “consistently showing up” Judy was able to get to know and to encourage two Woodner residents – Ariel Dansky and Shirley Millican – to become Village members.

Hannah informed the Committee that the Union's Food Aid Working Group was in need of video and photographic assistance. Rick Reinhard agreed to shoot both stills and video of a Saturday morning food distribution and door-to-door delivery in order to help them raise financial support as well as increase community awareness. He was able to work with Chris Roudiez to provide these.

In April 2023 President Bill Emmet, responding for the Village, wrote to Councilmember Robert White, chair of the Committee on Housing, asking the Council to place reasonable caps on rent increases as a means to try to preserve continued diversity in Mount Pleasant. He wrote on behalf of all Mount Pleasant tenants but particularly those of the Woodner.

In November 2023 the Diversity Committee received an appeal for calls to ERAP, DC's Emergency Rental Assistance Program on behalf of a particular tenants' union member. Several members called in his support.

Hannah just gave me an update this week. The Union's Eviction Defense Group is currently supporting 20 high-priority, high-risk cases, of some 40 to 50 cases regularly in the eviction pipeline. Despite these efforts, residents continue to be evicted, and others get beaten down and self-evict. The Union has recently conducted two ERAP clinics to help folks with the process and with their applications. ERAP is tremendously underfunded and overwhelmed with requests. Just this week, what was designed to be the beginning of a three-month period of supports, funds were exhausted in less than 24 hours! Hannah concluded by saying that even when tenants fail to receive financial assistance the process can give them time to find alternative living situations.

The eviction crisis shows no signs of abating and the Committee will continue to strengthen and expand our partnership with Woodner residents in 2024.

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