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Sayre Brings Art to Life in Cuba

By Brad Becker

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Sayre Lower School art teacher Georgia Henkel recently returned from a trip to Cuba where she fulfilled a long-term professional desire to establish a children's art exchange. Her trip was made possible through a summer sabbatical grant from Sayre School.

Georgia's journey began last January when she was visiting family in Florida. She wandered into a small gallery on Anna Maria Island that had an exhibit featuring artists from Baracoa, Cuba. Baracoa is located on the spot where Christopher Columbus landed in Cuba on his first voyage. Baracoa lies on the Bay of Honey (*Bahía de Miel*) and is surrounded by a wide mountain range which causes it to be quite isolated, apart from a single mountain road built in the 1960s. Georgia has always sought to provide her students with an authentic creative experience. It was also her desire to connect them with young artists in a more obscure and underserved area, a place where a youth art exchange had not been pursued before; to give Sayre students the opportunity to share a unique view of their cultural environment as seen through their own art and eyes.

Georgia decided to explore what opportunity might exist for her students to exchange art with children in Baracoa. That spark of curiosity, ignited by a random visit to a small Florida gallery, would lead to one of the richest experiences of this Sayre teacher's life.

"I contacted Soledad Pagliuca, the organizer of the exhibit in Florida. Soledad also started the Friendship Association whose mission is to promote and foster meaningful educational and cultural exchanges with the Cuban people. They have concentrated most of their efforts in the Guantanamo Province. Though she lives in St. Augustine, Soledad was excited about my idea and met with me to share her thoughts on the challenges and potential of a children's art exchange in Baracoa."

Youth art exchanges usually begin with a call for submissions, Georgia explained, and typically the process becomes a competition where judges determine selections. Georgia quietly unveiled her plans for submissions that would be representative of daily student art, pieces done at home or in classes, and not directed by any particular theme.

In Georgia's first conversations with Soledad, she had learned about how and where children are taught art in Cuba, about the abundance of expression in the artistic realm. She also learned about the challenges of a children's art exchange not only in a remote city such as Baracoa, but anywhere in a society that uses art primarily to convey ideology.

"While young artists in Cuba have freedom to explore materials, the subject matter must be related to one of the Revolutionary leaders," explained Georgia. "When looking at the children's art, you see not only the repeated faces of these men but also images from their writings."

"Cuba has always used culture to soften the face it presents to the world. I understood that the arts are an integral part of the school curriculum and wanted to understand the pedagogy and purpose for this

dedication to culture. I quickly realized that all Cuban children are given a unique and beautiful arts immersion at a very young age. It is inherent in their everyday lives.... music, art and dance are everywhere. Having so few distractions lends itself to a calmer, sometimes more introspective and focused way of life. “

“Most cities in Cuba are centered around a Casa de Cultura. These are usually historic buildings, closely monitored and run by the government that serve as a community and tourist hub. Free concerts, performances and studio visits are held there. They also serve as the official place where students who have been identified as gifted in the arts can come and work with professional musicians, dancers and artists. Artists in Casa de Cultura make art primarily for tourists, but create art for personal fulfillment on the side.”

After discussions with the Cuban Minister of Culture, the Casa de Cultura lead teacher Jorge Vinent, arranged for Georgia to exhibit art of twenty Sayre students at the Casa de Cultura and the city hospital. The art will remain in Baracoa for one year.

“The experience of sharing the Sayre artwork illustrated a clear difference in the freedom that we have in the US to satisfy our curiosity by exploring our imagination, glean ideas from famous artists, and challenging ideas - freedoms we take for granted every day.”

While the paintings from the young Cuban artists will be exhibited at the University of Kentucky Medical Center and at the Central Library in downtown Lexington, Georgia is launching the exhibit in the Sayre School Buttery, our school cafeteria, which could be considered the campus Casa de Cultura.

“We cannot know at this point how the Art Exchange will evolve over the years, but for the time being I am excited that when we gather in the Buttery for lunch or special events, our entire school community will have an opportunity to view and talk about these wonderful paintings created by the children from Baracoa.”

Our Mission:

Sayre School provides an innovative and inclusive learning environment that empowers students to achieve academic excellence, embrace challenge, and cultivate integrity in order to lead purposeful lives in an ever-changing world.