Liana Kallman

Public statement

My study abroad experience in Cuba was truly unique and looking back on it, I feel a real sense of pride. I feel proud for choosing to challenge myself— for moving to a country with no diplomatic or trade relations with the United States, little to no internet access, and directly enrolling in classes taught entirely in Spanish with Cuban students. More so, I feel pride in Cuba for its commitment to its ideals, its defiant stance on injustice, and people’s resilience and ability to resolver or find creative solutions to problems and make do. In the four and a half months I spent there, I saw a lot of things that were not perfect, but above all, I felt inspired and proud of what I saw and experienced in Cuba.

Resolver is one of the most important lessons I learned in Cuba and it was also one of the first Cuban phrases that I learned. Based on the understanding that things often do not happen as planned in Cuba, nor do they happen on schedule, I was advised to learn to resolver. When I arrived in January, I had pre-enrolled in classes at the University of Havana based on a guide that had been sent out by email and submitted those courses to U of M for approval. When I arrived, I found that the course selection was not what I thought it was and that I wouldn’t be enrolling in the courses I had “registered for.” Over the course of the semester, I also learned that sometimes, the meeting times for classes would change without warning and that I would inevitably show up to an empty classroom once every couple of weeks. When this happened, I was frustrated but I had to learn to resolver: which in this case meant do my best to figure out what I’d missed, when the next class was and do my assignments to the best of my ability. Making do is one of the central features of daily life in Cuba. In any given neighborhood in La Habana, you will see more shoe repair businesses than new shoe stores; creative solutions are applied to everything from cooking with limited ingredients to the cars, which are held together by an assortment of mixed and matched parts. Buses do not come on time, trains are worse. Restaurants get you the food when they are ready and not when you are. Accepting that things do not always go as planned nor do they work on my schedule is one of the most important lessons I’ve learned. Growing up in the United States, where schedules are scrupulously followed and customer service is paramount, I can honestly say that this was an unfamiliar concept and I got frustrated on numerous occasions. But I learned to let the frustration go with a smile, taking the challenging aspects of life in Cuba with the beautiful ones.

Another lesson I learned Cuba that is of huge personal importance to me has to do with priorities. Cuba is a small island nation with few natural resources and a trade embargo from the largest and most powerful economy in the world. It stands as one of the only non-capitalist countries in the world. Remarkably, Cuba was a colony through the 20th century and was under U.S. control until a little more than a half-century ago. These circumstances have created a lot of economic hardship and have forced Cubans to make many sacrifices and do without a lot of things. But in spite of these obstacles, Cuba has maintained a commitment to the values of public education and accessible health care and has achieved incredible “first world indicators” in health and education, which is evident from their 99% literacy rate, long life expectancy and lowest infant mortality rate in Latin America. I believe that we as North Americans can learn something from their very different system rather than writing it off completely. Cuba’s political and economic systems definitely require reform, but it has a lot to be proud
of. Cuba has clearly stated its priorities and its commitment to these priorities is evident in the facts above all else. If Cuba can achieve these goals in the face of so much economic hardship, then the U.S. can do the same and more. We have all of the resources available to solve our social problems and no excuses should be made for our high maternal mortality rate and our failure to educate all of our youth and provide a college education to everyone who wants one. I am committed to fighting for a more just world and my resolve has been strengthened by the example that Cuba sets.