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On the Trail of the Literacy Campaign: an Internship in Cuba

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*Once you learn to read,
you will forever be free.*
—Frederick Douglass

As I sit in a small living room, an elderly woman details her experiences fifty years ago. She was seventeen, her country had just experienced a revolution, and drawn up in the spirit, she volunteered to join Cuba's literacy campaign. I can hear cars driving by and kids yelling on the street below us; hopefully the microphones won't pick up the noise. Her Cuban accent slurs some words and she is sometimes hard to follow, but her stories are captivating. I am told about a defining experience in her life, a point of realization and discovery. With thousands of other teenagers, she learned what it was like to transform a country for the better.

Juniors at High Tech High are required to complete a three-week internship at the end of the academic year. To expand my internship experience beyond the typical workspace, I searched for options outside of the United States. Traveling to Cuba was particularly intriguing to me, as its government and economy are in a transitional state. Luckily, I had a contact to Catherine Murphy, who directs the **Literacy Project**. The project documents various literacy campaigns by making documentaries and archiving oral histories. The project originally focused on Cuba's literacy campaign, which served as a model for similar campaigns in other countries throughout Latin America.

As an intern I had the privilege of participating in collecting oral histories about Cuba's literacy campaign of 1961. Fifty years ago, following the revolution, more than 100,000 students from the cities volunteered as brigadistas in the campaign; most of them were 12 to 19 years old and over half were women. The students were loaded up into trucks and driven to the countryside. For many months these dedicated teenagers lived with impoverished families, teaching them how to read and write.

During my stay in Havana, I lived with the godson of my father's friend, Osciel (a 20-year-old nurse) and his older brother Lester. Their apartment was in a beautiful but deteriorating Spanish building. My annual travels to El Salvador and other Latin American countries had accustomed me to a limited standard of living. I ate a dinner of mostly beans and rice every night at Osciel's parents' house. Despite the limited menu, the family was incredibly warm and hospitable, sharing what little they had.

My main task was to locate brigadistas and their former students and to interview them. Cubans tend to be highly sociable, so finding people who were involved in the Literacy Campaign was not a problem. Osciel's mother helped me find brigadistas and Catherine Murphy had arranged for Norma, one of the central figures in the documentary *Maestra*, to connect me with other former teachers. Norma had been a brigadista as a teenager, and is now a retired psychologist. She has a dynamic personality and a striking collection

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of hats. She also has a broad network in the Afro-Cuban community of Havana, where I lived and did most of my work. Overall I interviewed 14 people—12 former teachers and two former students.

What was most compelling to me about the interviews, and was universal to all of them, was the teachers' sheer dedication to improving the living situation of their fellow Cubans and their country as a whole. Members of the Juventud Rebelde, the revolutionary youth organization that the new government sets up, were encouraged to volunteer. "I wanted to help spread literacy because it was something the country needed," said Angelica Martiz. Despite all obstacles, the brigadistas were determined to uphold the revolutionary spirit that had swept their country. This campaign was one of the first major acts of the new government that transitioned its military revolution to a social one, in order to bring about unity, equality and change.



The country was still stabilizing at that time, and the brigadistas faced danger. One brigadista I interviewed described how she had received a letter from an anti-revolutionary group threatening her life. She knew of another literacy teacher who had been killed earlier that year and took the threat seriously. Her supervisors advised her to go home, but she refused. The government then issued her a gun for self-protection. The interviewees routinely recounted incidents that revealed the depth of their determination.

The young brigadistas traveled far from home to spread literacy. The campaign lasted for ten months, and during that time the volunteers lived with families in the countryside, a life they had little or no previous conception of. To travel from the city to the countryside at that time for Cubans would be the equivalent of Americans going to work in developing countries today. The brigadistas explained that "where we were there was not potable water, there was not light, there were not sanitary services." But beyond that, "there were no schools, there were no hospitals, there were no social services." The volunteers witnessed first hand what had incited the revolution.

During the day the volunteers helped their students with agricultural work or explored the area, but in the afternoon they taught. As one volunteer described, "At first they [the peasants] were reluctant, afraid that it would be too difficult an accomplishment. It took a little bit of work and we had to gradually build their confidence in us. They realized how important this was for them. I started out teaching one or two; when others saw them learning it turned into then three or four, and then ten, and then twenty until I had a huge group of people to tutor." People who once did not know how to write their name and had to sign documents they could not read with a fingerprint, were soon capable of basic reading and writing. Students reported that for peasants who relied on buying and selling goods for a living, literacy brought new leverage to their interactions as they could more competently negotiate and make agreements. It also allowed the peasants to organize as a community.



Cuba's campaign also played a pivotal role for women in society. Women in Cuba, especially in comparison to other Latin American countries, play an incredibly active role in society and government. Brigadistas reported that they became much more independent and self-confident because of their months in the campaign. This was particularly significant as most of the brigadistas, and most of my interviewees, were women. Parents were often reluctant to let their children go, but especially their daughters, as women had been more protected. The experience not only meant that their parents gave them more freedom, but changed the way they saw themselves and what they felt they were capable of.

The brigadistas drew strength from their experience but perhaps even more from the relationships they forged. I interviewed three brigadistas together; they had trained together fifty years earlier and were still close friends. They met at the famous beach resort Varedero, which the government had turned into a training facility for the brigadistas. They went to the same area of the country, the Sierra Maestra, although they were many miles apart and so could not see each other often. However, every once in a while they made the trek and bonded over their experience, a bond which was still very evident 50 years later as they laughed together during the interview.

Cuba's literacy campaign served not only to unite brigadistas with each other, but was also a way to unite the country after the revolution. One brigadista explained to me how she "confronted a reality that she did not know existed." For her, the campaign brought a consciousness of the difficulties that peasants were facing. Another teacher recounted that the fact that homework had to be done by candlelight was a blow, but it "taught me to help people, so that things would get better, so that in an era ahead people could have another kind of life." The brigadistas lived among the peasants as family, each group bringing a component of their culture and lifestyle to the other.

Just as the people I interviewed described finding independence, human kindness and fulfillment in their stint in the countryside, I felt echoes of their experience in my time in Cuba. Although I cannot truly compare my few weeks in Havana (with a phone line to home), to their many months in the countryside, I was also living in a very different place—with more limited comforts, hygiene and diet than I was used to—and finding that strangers were warm and welcoming and that those new found relationships were what made the experience life changing. The experiences of the brigadistas and my own experience also made me acutely aware of the power of education beyond the classroom.

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