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**Cuba in the heart of Rosemari Mealy (I)**

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American journalist, writer, and activist Rosemari Mealy has a long love and solidarity story with Cuba, which lasts forever as it is profound and there is no space for hatred or manipulation. This is the dreamed story for two nations with several reasons to go through life like brotherly peoples.

I guess that is why when a complete stranger contacted her via WhatsApp, she replied with kindness and called her: sister. The magic word, beyond the name of the mutual friend who brought us into contact, was the name of a small, neighboring, beloved country: Cuba.

**What brought you to Havana in the first place, and how long did you stay here?**

My history and Cuba, dates to the spring of 1972, when I first arrived at the Jose Marti Airport on a late-night flight from Mexico City. I was traveling with more than 150 members of the

5th Contingent of the Venceremos Brigade. The legendary US Cuba solidarity organization that was founded in 1969 in opposition to the U.S. blockade, with the specific purposes of challenging the travel restrictions imposed by the United States Government. We were met at the airport by leaders and staff of the Cuban Institute of Friendship with the People (ICAP). ICAP is an NGO founded in 1960 soon after the Cuban Revolution, and one of its functions is to develop and maintain solidarity with groups and organizations around the world.

The long circuitous route to Cuba was in open defiance of US law because we traveled without a license issued by the US Treasury Department. I wanted to see and learn first-hand what this Cuban Revolution was all about. I did not believe in or have any identification with the U.S. government's dominate hostility toward Cuba or the racist anti-Cuban narrative fueled by the Cuban-exile community in Miami and New Jersey.

For Five weeks, ICAP facilitated our volunteer work with the more than 150 US Brigadistas. We lived and worked side-by-side with our Cuban sisters and brothers participating in the construction of an entire new community in the town of Los Naranjos. The complex was designed to offer families new housing and included a school, a community center, and a polyclinic and the renovation of a dairy farm. It was an awesome experience to get to know and learn from Cubans who came from every walk of life that included secondary, technical, high school and college youth, construction workers, doctors, intellectuals, teachers, artists, musicians, and poets. Whether while laboring together during the workday, at lunch, merienda breaks, dinner or at the vibrant after work social and cultural events, everyone eagerly shared and spoke to us about the accomplishments of what "Fidel's Revolution" had done for them and their families.

After we completed the volunteer work phase of our visit, we traveled by bus all over the island, visiting provinces after provinces, engaging communities in some in the remotest part of the country. We were welcomed by the Committees to Defend the Revolution (CDR), students representing the Young Communist League (Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas (UJC). We were hosted by schools, trade unions and women's organizations. We visited

museums, cultural institutions, restaurants, factories, and collective farms. I witnessed with my own eyes and heard living testimony to the positive changes, where Cubans contrasted life before the Revolution, when there was little food, no employment, no schools, no hospitals, and no doctors, comparing to what the Revolution had now succeeded. People openly boasting accomplishments that were both personal while broadly reflected community empowerment. Long lasting friendships were formed that last even today.

### **If you were to talk or write about the life of the Cuban women, what would you say about us?**

The first thing that I would say 'Cuban Women are Resilient, 'despite the burden of a 60-year-old US economic blockade. Women have made enormous strides in setting goals and achieving gender equality and women's empowerment. Their benchmarks are now standardized as established norms of the United Nations Women's Strategic Plan. The plan supports the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, which most nations even the capitalist one's subscribed to.

Secondly, I would have to buttress the narratives of Cuban women who directly participated in the early days of the revolutionary process. For example, the women who were young teachers in the Literacy Campaigns and who became the heroin's and patriotic vanguards of the Revolution. The experiences of Cuban women who reflect such pride in the entire nation of having served on international missions. Equally important to write about are the female combatants who under the banner of Operation Carlotta <sup>(1)</sup> fought against Apartheid in support of the African Liberation Movements when Africa called, and Cuba answered. Those mothers and daughters who have sacrificed and left families at home to serve in so many displays of Cuba's international solidarity during recent natural disasters in all parts of the world in medical brigades and as educators and technicians.

I would out of necessity have to talk about how Cuban women today belong to various mass and social organizations as evidenced by the leading role that they play in the national economy. Their broad presence and large representation as union leaders which enables them to initiate and influence the making of decisions, including those that affect the interests of working women.

I would explain how their leadership roles is critical to food production in areas of organic farming and the alliance that they are making. Particularly those Cuban women who identify as African Descendants who are leading the discussion that carry out building strategic alliances that fortify the gains of the Revolution ,while at the same time reclaim the impact of social activism and unveil the theoretical tools necessary for the construction of more inclusive and welcoming spaces that involve Black, gay, lesbian and members of the transgendered communities (Drs. G. Arrandia and N. Guillard, in personal communications and interviews where they as social scientist and sociologist primarily work on the issues of gender, race, sexual orientation and issues of diversity and identity in a Cuban and Caribbean context has contributed much to the lively debates on race and racism in Cuba).

Finally, to illustrate the challenging task of what Cuban women must face daily as a result of the blockade require referencing some very important observations where Dr. Arrandia-Covarrubias explains:

*The cultural impact of the blockade, in the space that transcends beyond the political and economic damage, such as the lack of medicines and medical equipment....the anguish caused by sustained shortages in daily life, where the younger generations have known no other reality than that of shortages, a childhood with minimal limitations for their enjoyment, due to the absence of simple things, such as modern toys, that stimulate their abilities. ...the uncertainty of housewives at the time of preparing the family diet due to the lack of simple but indispensable products in the diet....the sadness of families who could not have the relationships that other peoples have, where emigration is a daily phenomenon...<sup>(2)</sup>.*

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1. Carlota was a Lucumí-Yoruba resistance fighter who led a slave rebellion in Cuba during the mid-19th century.

2. Arrandia -Covarrubias, G. (April 4, 2021). *Lectores: A propósito de la Solidaridad con Cuba, apuntes de una crónica*. Moncada. Retrieved April 5, 2021, from <http://moncadalectores.blogspot.com/2021/04/a-proposito-de-la-solidaridad-con-cuba.html>