

Caring hands reach out to Cuba

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

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Nebraskans do mission work in estranged country.

A sense of adventure and intrigue surrounding the isolated Caribbean island, and a chance to help others, lured three local residents to Cuba.

But they returned from an

eight-day mission trip to the communist country with so much more.

For Devin Brundage, the trip was life changing.

“The people have so little yet they still have so much,” said Brundage who is an electrical engineer for Central Nebraska Public Power & Irrigation District. “I’d stare at their little houses and realize how much they live with what little they have.”

CNPP&ID biologist and trip organizer Mark Peyton said the people have a deep sense of pride in what they have.

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Family physician Carol Shackleton said Cubans don't know they are poor materialistically because they are so rich in other ways such as in family and community,

The Gothenburg residents, and five others from central Nebraska, were in Cuba from Nov. 13-20 where they repaired damage from hurricanes on an island southwest of Cuba known as the Isla de la Juventud (Isle of Youth).

"I had been involved with Habitat for Humanity houses and enjoyed doing manual labor for the benefit of someone else," Shackleton said about signing up for the trip. "It was also a chance to travel to a place I wasn't likely to be able to see otherwise."



Because of his electrical experience, Brundage said Peyton approached him about the trip.

Peyton had learned about the island, its people and birds from Felipe Chavez-Ramirez who is chief science officer at the Crane Trust.

"When I heard about the destruction from hurricanes, it provided us an opportunity to go there," he explained.

Getting approval from the U.S. government to visit and work in Cuba turned into a two-year-long ordeal which Peyton said made it even more important to go.

"I was disappointed we couldn't have done 10 times as much as we did," he said.

While on Isla de la Juventud, the group traveled to an ecological reserve where they drove pipe

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for a water well, fixed the electrical system at reserve headquarters, provided materials for reserve workers and their families, and cut and replanted dead palm trees for parrot nesting.

Biologists made up about half the group membership.

Because certain paperwork needed to be completed, the group worked only two days on the reserve.

They stayed in a hotel about five miles from the reserve and drove rental cars back and forth.

While there, Brundage said he observed the breakdown of families with many single-parents heading households.

“But what struck me is the underlying happiness even though they have nothing,” he said.

Peyton said the Isla de la Juventud reminded him of the Sandhills where people work hard and are happy, adaptable and resourceful.

“They make do with whatever they have,” he said.

The three were also struck at how Cubans adapt to their environment.

“We came from an environment that’s clean and disinfected and found ourselves eating in backyards 20 feet away from pigs,” Brundage said. “We were shooing away chickens who were roosting in trees above the table and rinsed our hands in a rain barrel with everyone else.”

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There was little hygiene yet no one became sick.

The group took precautions—purifying water with tablets and drinking bottled water—but also drank freshly squeezed grapefruit juice.

The camaraderie they felt during dinner on their last night on Isla de la Juventud was also a highlight.

“You were part of the group and part of their family,” Shackleton said.

Peyton said the people they helped were honestly and deeply appreciative of what the Nebraskans did for them.

“In their world, we’re the Warren Buffetts when they make \$25 50 \$60 a month,” he said.

Even though he doesn’t agree with the country’s politics, Peyton said people are people and the Cubans showed no animosity toward the group from a country that imposed an economic embargo because of Cuba’s communist government.

“Cuba is more than its politics,” Brundage said.

However the embargo has taken its toll.

All three said buildings and homes were falling apart and needed repaired and repainted.

In Havana, they said structures with beautiful architecture, including vaulted ceilings and

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frescoes, are crumbling.

Parks and residences are fenced.

“But they’re still prideful of 51 years of revolution and very proud of their government for the most part,” Brundage said.

At the end of the trip, Peyton said he was shocked at how much gratification the group received from the whole process.

“The people were so grateful for what we did.”

He added that his minister told him how mission work often inspires people to do more.

“He was right,” Peyton said. “I wanted to go back or go somewhere else.”

Leaving Cuba left Brundage with a greater appreciation of what he has.

“People are always striving for more in our society,” he said. “We lose sight of what’s truly important in life.

“Sometimes when you strive for more, you end up with less.” Brundage said.

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