

Teen journeys to Cuba to meet Jewish communities

Lauren Mikalov

"It was so amazing. It was one of the best weeks of my life. It was such a great week that I wish everyone could have experienced it," said Ben Varon, 18, New City, who returned from Cuba after spending a week there on a religious mission to the Jewish communities, in June.

"It's so unknown and so secluded. The majority of Jewish Cubans have a strong connection to Cuba that was just unbelievable. Cubans love Cuba and do not want to leave, no matter what. The Jewish people there have never left the country and have never seen Israel. They don't have much exposure to Judaism, either, but the connection was so far more than any of us ever believed it could be."

There are only about 1,500 Jews in Cuba, equivalent to the entire student body at Clarkstown High School North.

Varon, who just graduated Solomon Schechter High School of Westchester, first learned of the travel opportunity towards the end of his senior year. One of his teachers, Rabbi Jeffrey Segelman, had finally gotten permission to visit after he obtained a special license from the Cuban government.



"They were initially denied this permit and had applied again this year," Varon said. Never one to miss an opportunity, Varon, along with 10 other classmates, decided to make it part of their WISE internship program. "The WISE project is something that you do that you always wanted to do, yet you do not think you will do in the future," Varon explained. "It gives you the opportunity to master and go further in it and make it a project." The trip's out-of-pocket expenses cost a total of \$3,200 per person.

First, Varon spread the word around Rockland that he would be visiting Cuba and started gathering as many useful items as possible. He collected over the counter and prescription medicines, toiletries, clothing, CD's, small pieces of jewelry and also some Judaica. So much was donated, he said, that at JFK, each suitcase packed with items weighed 100 pounds each.

"They were so thankful for what we brought them. The first of the two days was devoted to sorting everything out. We separated everything into different categories. We always took a bag of stuff wherever we visited and they were very, very thankful for it. They were so warm and welcoming anyway, and would have been even if we hadn't given them this stuff.

"There was a connection of just being Jewish. We had such a great evening with them. We did Israeli dances. We interacted with the teenagers there. We talked to them about baseball, nightlife and parties. They love clubs and dancing; they are so similar. They talk about school and universities and deciding before college what they want to do."

The teens visited the entire island, which was about a 15-hour drive from one side to the other. Starting from Havana, they stopped at the 400 member Orthodox shul. Then, they drove to four provinces, which had anywhere from nine to 50 Jews each. "These provinces do not have large Jewish communities so there is no shul. Instead, one family takes on the responsibility. There, they will have one Shabbat dinner twice a month. That is the place they will meet if there is a Jewish celebration or holiday. That is the way they are able to hold onto their Judaism.

Then, the teens traveled back to Havana and visited a Conservative shul, also with about

400 members. "It used to be huge. During the revolution, the only way they were able to hold onto it was by selling half of it. They did whatever they could to hold onto it."

The people, he explained, although "dressing very well," are poverty stricken, at least when compared to the American way of life. "It is hard to explain. Everyone there is poor, so it is the norm and that's just the way they go about their life. Their appearances are not looking poor, they dress well -- but when you see where they live, you realize that they are very poor. Overall, Cuba is a very poor place.

"When you get married, you move into your parents' house. Everyone lives together. It's common for 12 people living together; it's really, really incredible.

"At one house, there were 57 people; there was one member from each family there and they were all different ages. One little girl sang two Jewish songs. It was amazing.

"During the day we would walk around for three or four hours and did touring." Rebecca Weintraub, a fellow classmate, helped put together the itinerary and did a binder project. She made 40 binders holding different Jewish prayers and also came with many photographs and illustrations. "We gave the teenagers different prayers and laid out the different pictures, so they took what they wanted. They made it their personal prayerbook."

Varon was shocked by the anti-American billboards "everywhere". There was one showing George Bush plus a Cuban terrorist equals Hitler. There was another one with the Statue of Liberty with her mouth open, making fun of liberty and bashing America.

"They are not anti-American people; they are anti-American government. They just hate our government. I think every person that I know who could have seen it, it would make them run."

"We went to four or five different Jewish communities and handed out stuff. We gave Israeli stamps and sang Jewish songs. We had two guys with us who knew fluent Spanish and a few others knew some from high school. That aside, we could communicate so well with them just through our Judaism. We had such a strong connection.

"When you hear Cuba, you think of cigars and Castro. It opened us to the fact that there are Jews all over the world. Even though you may not speak the same language, you can still connect with them."



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