

## Let's end this useless grudge we have against Cuba



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Recently about 40 Utahns and another 10 or so friends from around the country received U.S. visas to legally tour Cuba for a week.

My favorite experience there, one that brings a smile whenever it comes back to me, is this:

We visit a school for blind children. We're there to see the facility, meet students and educators and deliver school supplies. We are greeted by a large display reading, "El Bloqueo es Genocido" (The blockade is genocide), referring to the U.S. economic embargo against Cuba.

Genocide is quite a word. Many of us wonder how we will be received.

We are warmly welcomed by the principal and invited to tour the classrooms. We visit children

who are learning vocational skills. Their teacher says because of the American embargo they have a terrible time getting art paper. A proud young girl presents us with hand-colored bookmarks. I bend down to accept mine, thank her in Spanish, and am surprised to receive a kiss. We visit another classroom where the students are using prehistoric Braille machines.

We convene in a multipurpose room where the children have prepared a program for us. Alone, in pairs and as a whole group, the kids sing songs. Children who still have some sight help their fellow students to the microphone. Older boys play conga and bongo drums and one of the teachers tears it up on the piano.

During the popular song about a farm girl from Guantanamo - a song that always makes me nervous because of the United States' uninvited presence and un-American behavior at Guantanamo - instead of trouble, magic happens. The visitors start to sing along and the children begin to dance.

Utahns leave their seats, take the hands of blind Cuban children and pair off until nearly everyone is on their feet, singing and dancing without respect to race, age, language or ability. The children are beaming, the adults

are beaming, teachers and visitors have tears in their eyes.

The song and the dancing, fueled by powerful drumming and an incessant, ringing Cuban piano, goes on for 10 or 15 minutes. It's frenetic, it's chaos, it's pure joy. When it's over, everyone is spent, sweaty, laughing, hugging and smiling. Several sets of dance partners kiss one another on the cheek.

A few minutes later, I try out a new phrase on the piano player, - *Sergio, que pasaste!* (You've outdone yourself!) He effusively hugs and kisses me.

Heading home, my flight is canceled and I have an unscheduled 12-hour wait in Havana's Jose Marti International Airport. I try not to spend it worrying I will become part of some international incident. Instead I think about Jose Marti, Cuban hero, airport namesake and writer of the poem that became the song, "Guantanamera."

Then I smile, remembering the school, the dancing, all the kisses. Everywhere we've been, the Cuban people have been gracious, friendly and warm.

What would Americans do if people who we had been taught were perpetrators of a genocide against us showed up to tour our schools? Would we give them

# The Salt Lake Tribune

kisses and gifts? Would we joyously dance with them?

Is the United States guilty of genocide against Cuba? Certainly not as I understand the word. But I do think we're guilty of holding a grudge well past any usefulness.

I don't see any reason to continue the economic embargo. Cuba is a poor country that could use many of the things we have in abundance here. I picture the happy little school that needs modern supplies and, as Jose Marti says in "Guantanamera," "I want to share my good fortune with the poor people of the earth."

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*BARB GUY is a regular contributor to these pages. © Salt Lake Tribune.*