

Art, music form connections with Cubans for WKU representatives

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In true Cuban fashion, students and professors from Western Kentucky University described their trip to the country in March as one filled with improvisation.

Two professors and two students spent 10 days traveling to two cities in Cuba, meeting art teachers and students with whom they've connected Kentucky classrooms through several letter and art exchanges.

The trip was possible through two Faculty-Undergraduate Student Engagement grants awarded to Brandy Day and Amy Wallace, who studied the inclusion of art in reading and writing lessons in Warren County schools before taking similar lessons abroad.

Through workshops, the group explored ideas of hope and identity inspired by an Ecuadorian artist. In some cases, WKU art students sent unfinished artwork for Cuban students to respond to and finish. Some Cuban students initiated work that will be completed by students here.

Such an exchange offers Kentucky students a personalized understanding of Cuban hopes and dreams, said art professor Neli Ouzounova, who took work from her drawing students to Cuba.

"It came back on a personal level in a way (WKU art students) understand," she said.

Art education professor Miwon Choe, who has visited Cuba since 2004, said the trip fit together like a puzzle as they embraced the Cuban mantra that everything will work out.

She and the others from WKU spent each night repackaging their workshops to fit their audience: simplifying a project to suit elementary students instead of teachers – scrapping one plan in favor of an entirely new one to engage music and art professors.

Many of the workshops centered on the work of Oswaldo Guayasamin, an Ecuadorian artist whose work united citizens in his country trying to reconcile their individuality with a national identity.



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Miwon Choe (center), Western Kentucky University art education professor, shows a premade book to elementary students at José Antonio Diaz Pelaez (Centro del Las Artes) art school in Havana, Cuba.

American students wrote to the students in Cuba, and the Cuban students responded.

Broken into five rectangular panels, each piece can be rotated and rearranged in infinite ways, symbolizing “infinite possibilities in individual identity,” Wallace said.

They incorporated the piece in several lessons and workshops, including a fourth-grade classroom in Warren County and workshops for several groups in Cuba.

Wallace, an elementary education and music graduate, worked with a group of Cuban first-year English students to create their own five-panel piece to describe their identity – an activity she first used in a fourth-grade classroom at Jody Richards Elementary School.

Bringing the activity to Cuba allowed her to see the differences in how people in the two countries see themselves.

“A lot of how we identify ourselves is what we love to do,” Wallace said in an interview. Students’ work depicted travel, family, friends and favorite places.

Day, an art education major, introduced Guayasamin’s piece to a room full of professors from the Ernesto Lecouna Conservatory of Music. She focused on the hope the piece communicates and asked those present to create their own five panels to offer their idea of hope to students in Kentucky.

She told the audience that being in Cuba was her own gift of hope because, at one point, she was spiraling out of control and had to overcome hardships that would have prevented her from having such opportunities, she said in an interview.

“For me, it’s not just another school trip,” she told the crowd. Day, 31, is a nontraditional student who is married with two children. “People like me don’t get the opportunity to do (this).”

When the Cuban professors stood to explain the drawings they produced to share hope, several explained that they could more adequately express their message through music. Many sang or played piano.

The results were moving, Choe said. “This kind of interaction is very special.”

The WKU group experienced “a really rare opportunity” to see spontaneity in their workshops because often tours in Cuba are limited to rehearsed presentations, she said.

In another activity, children illustrated a Cuban folk story that talks about overcoming fear with music. They created the first half of a book that Day will finish with students at Rockfield Elementary School this month using a different story with a similar message.

The trip came three months after the U.S. announced plans to open diplomatic relations with Cuba. Though coincidental, the timing makes the personal interaction more meaningful, Choe said.

“Cubans are very hopeful,” she said.

Choe was in Cuba in 2004 when the Bush administration further restricted educational travel to the country. She formed relationships over the last 10 years – with more frequent trips in the last three – that made way for the group's trip in March.

The WKU group members said they were struck by the Cubans' positivity despite their lack of resources, from toilet paper to art supplies.

"If they don't have anything to give, they'll get up and sing for you," Wallace said.

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