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Photos Open A 'window To Cuba'

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By Amy Mertz The Capital Times

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Accompanying Rumsey and Dodson on the trip was Jude Javier Parra-Sickles, a UW-Madison communication arts graduate and friend of Rumsey who now lives in California. Neither Dodson nor Rumsey speaks Spanish, so Parra-Sickles -- whose family is from Mexico -- was helpful because he could work a camera and speak the language, Rumsey says. Parra-Sickles also took some of the photos in the exhibit.

The arrival in Camaguey was particularly memorable, Rumsey says. Cuban-Americans with immediate family in Cuba are permitted to visit their homeland just once every few years under the Bush administration's travel policy. Of course, others go illegally by flying out of countries outside the U.S., such as Mexico, Jamaica and Canada, Micke says.

"When we landed in Camaguey, the entire flight just erupted in applause," Rumsey says. "And once you get through customs ... there's these huge picture windows ... and there are people on the other side just pounding on the glass, waiting to see their family. It's really incredible.

"You want to start crying when you see these people ... And the three of us kind of talked before we got to go out -- I mean, Are we going to take pictures of these people out there? But we just felt like it wasn't really the right thing to do."

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Sister city link: Micke's first trip to Cuba was in 1999 with the Madison-Camaguey Sister City Association. That organization was started by former Madison City Council member Ricardo Gonzalez, a Cuban-American born in Camaguey, the island's third-largest city with a population over 300,000. It's the capital of Camaguey Province, which is known for dairy farming.

Micke was asked to head the cause when the sister city group started to donate medical supplies to a pediatric hospital in Camaguey. When the Bush administration imposed new travel restrictions in 2003 by allowing only humanitarian organizations to visit the country -- aside from Cuban-Americans and certain officials -- the sister city association failed to qualify for humanitarian classification and was forced to cease travel.

So in 2004 Micke started the Wisconsin Medical Project, which received a humanitarian mission license from the U.S. Department of the Treasury. The Medical Project has a separate export license from the U.S. Department of Commerce to send supplies overseas, Micke said.

The organization sends larger shipments by boat, and those who travel with the group take some medical supplies with them, Micke says. Items donated include wheelchairs, neo-natal incubators, crutches, stethoscopes, antibiotics and other medications, first aid supplies and sutures.

A shipment bound for Cuba was on the pier in Gulfport, Miss., when Hurricane Katrina hit in August and destroyed the supplies.

"Watching Bernie show all the doctors and the people in the medical community down there the pictures of the hurricane stuff was very hard to watch, because they were kind of before and after," Rumsey says. "So they got to see what donations they would have been able to use and also see what happened. I can only imagine their feeling, which is that it must have been overwhelming to know how much had gone into this great present for them."

She remembers one of Micke's comrades saying the hurricane may have taken the supplies, "but it cannot take our friendship."

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Children sitting in a window gaze out from the darkness into daylight, their feet dangling between the narrow iron bars.

Eight exhausted dominos rest on a native's fingertips, the table beneath them even more tattered.

A couple share a kiss in an apartment alley painted in various pastels.

Young women dancers warm up at the bar as the sun casts a homogeneous shadow onto the dull wooden floor through rows of

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small square windows.

These images, and 26 others, provide a glimpse of a country most Americans know little of, despite being just 90 miles south of Florida. But Madison residents Emily Rumsey and Dawnee Dodson hope to change that with "Window to Cuba: 30 Images of Camaguey."

The young filmmakers -- Rumsey a UW-Madison graduate with majors in communication arts and English, and Dodson a University of Utah master of fine arts grad -- accompanied the Wisconsin Medical Project on the group's last trip to Cuba in early December. They returned with more than 30 hours of film footage, which they will mold into a documentary on the humanitarian organization's commitment to supplying Cubans with a wide range of medical equipment and learning about the country's health care system.

Rumsey and Dodson traveled to Camaguey with the documentary being the primary purpose. It seemed a natural segue to share their experiences and to help raise money for the Medical Project by selecting some images -- both digital and film -- for a photography exhibit. "Window to Cuba" will be on display through

April at the Dardanelles restaurant on Monroe Street.

Through her fiance's parents, Rumsey met Dr. Bernie Micke, who started the Wisconsin Medical Project in 2004. When she told Micke she had a filmmaking business called trilobyte pictures that specializes in making documentary films about nonprofit organizations and good causes, the proverbial light bulb went on.

Health is a main theme in trilobyte pictures' productions, Rumsey says. She and Dodson met while working on a feature-length film for Planned Parenthood of Wisconsin about the history of family planning and contraception in the state, a project they hope to complete in April.

"So what Bernie and I sort of unspokenly mutually saw was the opportunity for people here to really see both what Cuba looks like and how friendly the people are, and how effective the health care system is ... that people could really see that in a way that they couldn't through just reading about it and hearing the stories," Rumsey says.

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Cuban health care: Cuba has good free universal medical care, says Micke, who is a family practice physician for UW Health on Odana Road. "I don't think they really have different things than we have here," he says. "They have common illnesses and some serious illnesses. Their general population is served by family doctors in the communities and various parts of the cities. The things they lack are equipment for monitoring sick children, for instance, in the hospital. They don't have all the medications we have here, but they have the basic things."

Cuba has infant mortality rates similar to or lower than the U.S., Micke says, mainly because of the emphasis placed on preventive care.

Micke credits Cuba's education system with making the health care system successful. "There's very, very little illiteracy," he says. "The kids are in school. You don't see kids, for the most part, begging on the streets. They all get a good basic education, and I think people who have basic education can learn about health care -- learn about how to care for themselves in better ways. I think they mesh."

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