

Planning a mission trip is a lot like making your favorite haystack, there are so many layers and textures and, if there is a particularly successful way to lead a mission trip its main component is getting everyone home safely. There are few more iconic foods in our culture than the ubiquitous haystack. Often it is served at the church potluck, after a special Friday night vespers, as the pre-meal for an Academy basketball game, etc. It seems that every church has its own version of it. Corn chips vs. tortilla chips, do you add rice to your bean topping, how about thousand island dressing vs. picante sauce . . . or both. There is no right or wrong answer.

When I make a haystack. I always begin with the chips; I like tortilla chips instead of corn chips. They start out pretty large and coarse. In October of 2019, I traveled for the first time in my life to the nation of Cuba. I was there to evaluate a proposed mission outreach project for the North Dallas Adventist Academy mission team named the GYT Team (Go Ye Therefore). The prospective project was located in the city of Holguin, the third most populous city on the island. It is in this sprawling city that the Delegacion Cubana del Este, Iglesia Adventista Del Septimo Dia (Eastern Cuban Conference of SDA) is located. I was met at the Holguin airport by Eber Delgado, president of the conference.



GYT Team arriving at the Conference office in Holguin Cuba

The project was the continued construction of a guest house at the conference office to house visiting missionaries and teachers. One story of the guest house had already been completed by a mission group from Andrews Academy led by Hector Flores and we were to begin work on the second story. Just as your choice of chips depends upon your personal preference, the mission trips that I lead always include construction; we may hold a VBS or host an evangelistic series, but it is always in conjunction with a construction project of some kind.



GYT Team working on the second story of the guest house

Next, I add the beans; in this case, the participants of the GYT Team. We invite any students or families who are connected with our NDAA Upper School. The students must be in the high school, but if their families choose to join them, the children must be able to obey any of the adult leaders on the team. Everyone has a job on the construction site from the youngest to the oldest. On this particular trip, our youngest was an energetic eight year-old who transported sacks used to deliver sand and gravel to our construction site back to the delivery trucks, or horse-drawn carts, depending on the day; we were in Cuba after all. In total we traveled with 30 team members including one family who joined us from Georgia.



Transportation in a cattle car

We arrived in Cuba on Thursday, March 5, 2020, during, unbeknownst to us, a worldwide pandemic. Due to US State Department guidelines, we flew into the Jose Marti International Airport in Havana. These guidelines were not in place when I traveled to Cuba on my evaluation visit; they were only implemented after I had returned to present the trip to our school board and our business manager had purchased all of our tickets to Holguin, Cuba. When we were later notified that US policy had changed, we were faced with the dilemma of either altering our plans to include a twelve-hour bus journey from Havana to Holguin or cancelling the trip. I like haystacks with some spice to contrast the smoothness; jalapeños usually fit the bill adding a little bite to the mix of flavors. It's surprise changes like having to notify all of the team members that the airport destination has been changed and an almost 500-mile overnight bus trip has been added to our itinerary that provide the needed spiciness to our meal.



Sunrise in Holguin

What's a haystack without lettuce, tomatoes, and onions? It's these cool, fresh ingredients in contrast with the temperature of the beans that give haystacks that potluck magic. Every day in Holguin there were new sights and smells; from the sound of horse drawn carts delivering cement block that needed to be hand-carried through the conference offices to the rear of the building where the construction site was located to the constant swoosh of the electric scooters. Many times whole families would ride on one scooter. There were the

daily mile long walks to Iglesia de Adoracion where our meals were prepared and eaten; then back to the conference office for construction work or VBS prep.



Special delivery, cement block by horse-drawn cart, unloading

When the construction day would end, the VBS evening would begin, we would engage a little cleanup from the construction site and then it would be off to the races to get to the church on time for the arrival of over 100 guests for the meetings. There were crafts to make and games to play, candy to distribute and the voices of children singing praises to God rang throughout the neighborhood. All in all, the GYT Team distributed clothing and needed supplies to the people of Holguin, assisted in the construction of a facility to house Bible workers, delivered water purification components to increase accessibility to potable water, and directed meetings to give people access to life-enhancing health information and the opportunity to give their lives to Christ.



GYT Team distributing donated items to one of the village churches

We arrived back in the US late in the evening on March 15 to find that our whole world had changed. In the news vacuum, which is Cuba, we had no idea how the rest of the world had inextricably changed to its current unrecognizable state of face masks and quarantines. What a stark ending of isolation to a trip dedicated to unity of purpose and people. We had no idea that the last time the people on our mission team would be together was at the airport. In a way, it makes me treasure our time in Cuba all the more.

Yeah, building a haystack is hard work, but it sure fills you up. 'Meanwhile his disciples urged him, "Rabbi, eat something." But He said to them, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about." ' Many people wonder why anyone would give up their entire spring break to go and work in the sun for strangers, but I would say there is nothing better than a well-constructed haystack.

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The parachute for VBS was a BIG hit



VBS praise time