Regional

SIUE alum finds great talent in Cuban artists

Aldemaro Romero
College Talk

Among the most important – but oftentimes unsung – heroes of colleges and universities are the alums. While their contributions may come in many shapes and forms, their enthusiasm for their alma mater is what sets them apart. One such person is Diane Schrage. Born in East St. Louis, she is a 1973 graduate of Southern Illinois University Edwardsville with a bachelor's degree in mass communications. Today she leads a non-profit organization called The Art and Heritage Initiative. And as soon as she heard of SIUE's collaborative initiative with the University of Havana in Cuba, which includes bringing Cuban art to campus, she offered her unique expertise to the project. You see Schrage has dealt before with the intersection of art and Cold War politics in a 2006 exhibition on the fall of the Berlin Wall.

"I always think the arts always bring foreign events like this in a more intriguing fashion," Schrage said. "More people are apt to view it in theater or as visual art in a gallery, or in a book, as opposed to in a class that they are taking."

Schrage recently visited Havana where she had the opportunity to meet with local artists and discuss the idea of bringing Cuban art to the United States.

"I was there for 11 days and I just fell in love with the country, the people, the culture," she said. "And they are so excited to hear about Americans. It is a country that should be viewed by everybody. It's just beautiful." She said that she was very impressed by the artistic spirit of the Cuban people despite their lacking basic art supplies.

"The thing that amazed me was that the artists there don't have the supplies that artists here in America have," she said. "They make do with what they can find. They have such a passion for what they do. Whatever they can find they use to communicate through their art. It's all just beautiful." While in Cuba, she met with officials of the Havana Museum of Fine Arts and found it comparable with any other great art museum in the world.

Photo courtesy of Diane Schrage

Diane Schrage (center) while visiting Havana riding a mini-taxi.

"One thing that I noticed in Cuba is that everybody is extremely knowledgeable about all forms of art, but that's their life, that's like part of who they are," Schrage said. "They just have to participate. They are very lovely and passionate people." Cuba is known for popular art that can be found in many places and at very reasonable prices.

"The sad thing is the embargo," Schrage said about the now 50-year-old trade embargo between the United States and the island nation. "They are dependent upon who comes to Cuba. Tourism is the biggest industry in Cuba, so these tourists that come in probably, from my point of view, take advantage of this. They can buy really great paintings with little money and the talent that they fly back home with and put on their walls is phenomenal and they know it. It's sad because the artists' talent should be recognized." She said that she often reflects about the future of the political relations between the two nations.

"The embargo will be lifted," she said. "I have no doubt on that. I don't know when but I hope soon. When that is lifted Cuba will see a change in the country. I hope and pray that that change will be for the good of Cuba." Still, she said that she marvels at the quality of art being done in Cuba even without the monetary resources or rewards.

"The moment right now in Cuba is with the artists who do art because of the passion, not because of the money," Schrage said. "That's a unique thing. There are a lot of artists out there in the world, and I am not saying that they are insincere about what they do, but would they still have the passion to do it if they had to take what a Cuban is paid? It's their passion and they perform it the best they can." She said that she believes that cultural exchanges like the one she is working on will facilitate the normalization of relations between the United States and Cuba.

"I think that's the fastest way that the embargo would come down, if you can get as many Americans going to Cuba and seeing what it's like and vice versa," she said. "The embargo needs to end and I think the more that people are going there, the more they are going to see what this culture has to give to the world."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.