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Jefferson College of Health Professions Students
Study in Cardenas, Cuba – Philadelphia’s Sister City

Adrienne Tarola, BA*
Debra Tupe, OTR/L, MPH, MS*

* Thomas Jefferson University

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Jefferson College of Health Professions Students Study in Cardenas, Cuba – Philadelphia’s Sister City

Nine occupational therapy students from Jefferson College of Health Professions (JCHP), Thomas Jefferson University, accompanied by four faculty members and a member of the Philadelphia-Cardenas Sister City Association, traveled to Cuba the first week in March to take part in an educational exchange program. The one-week-long study opportunity was part of a program established in May of 2000 to promote people-to-people exchanges between the United States and Cuba. At that time, the City of Cardenas formally invited Philadelphia to become a Sister City. The TJU visit not only supported the mission of the Sister City relationship, but also provided students and faculty with the opportunity to explore occupational therapy practice in a different social, cultural and political context.

Debra Tupe, OTR/L, MPH, MS, a faculty member in the JCHP Occupational Therapy Department, became interested in the healthcare system in Cuba during her studies for her Masters of Public Health in International Health degree from New York Medical College. Ms. Tupe had the opportunity to visit Cuba in 1999 to explore the educational, health, and political systems of the island and understand the role of occupational therapy in healthcare. During her visit, Ms. Tupe made connections with various foundations and agencies in Cuba. Her involvement with the Philadelphia Cardenas Sister City Association served as the entrée into program development in Cuba as Thomas Jefferson University provided the opportunity and support to develop and implement the educational exchange program.

The students and faculty split their time in Cuba between the Center for Psychological and Sociological Research in Havana and the Clinic of Neurology and Rehabilitation for Children in Cardenas. The group visited a school for children with autism, a regional hospital, a senior center, and a family doctor clinic and met with representatives from Cardenas’s Federation of Cuban Women. During the site visits, the occupational therapy students refined their observations, interview and teaching skills, explored occupation and healthcare in a society very different from their own, and exchanged intervention approaches.

According to student traveler, Lokia Easton, Occupational Therapy (OT) student, MS class of 2003, “Cuba is a very simplistic country to the naked eye with many complex undercurrents. The pace is slower, the climate very political. Cubans don’t see themselves as black or white; they just see themselves as Cubans. They don’t see themselves as poor or rich; they see themselves as equals. They don’t appear to worry about the things they don’t have. They seem to be content with what they have and who they are, and they seem to live each day to the fullest.”

In preparation for this trip, the JCHP students staged various fundraising activities. They also underwent a structured orientation program, which included a group viewing of *Buena Vista Social Club*, a documentary film that introduced the students to the scenes, sounds, and culture of Cuba; a panel presentation by people who have traveled to Cuba; assigned readings about the history, culture, politics, and economics of Cuba; and participation in a book club. The students also completed class assignments relating to their visit, attended seminars while in Cuba, and identified a service-learning project implemented during their visit.

Upon returning to Philadelphia, the students shared their experiences with classmates through photographs and stories. The group also plans to share their experiences with the Jefferson and occupational therapy community through formal presentations, publications, and a film that chronicles the Cuba visit, produced by Neil Goldstein, a videographer who accompanied the students on the trip. The visit to Cuba provided the occupational therapy department with memories, ideas and questions to be considered in planning future exchanges with Cardenas.

As Vanessa Corbitt, OT student, class of 2003, states, "The Rehabilitation Center for Children with Disabilities had the biggest impression on me regarding occupational therapy. It was best defined here compared to the other places we visited, and each discipline played its part in the care of each child. Although it is easy for us to see what we felt could have been improved or changed because of how we practice, I think it is first important to consider and understand the culture and the politics, including economic factors that play a role in healthcare, before we attempt to bring in our ideas. This is something that will take time."

Occupational therapy student participants included Elaine O.Malley, Maya Karam, Julie Blakenmeyer, Eric Lu, Vanessa Corbitt, Melissa Moreno, Lakia Easton, Angela Leak and Humberty Ribiero. Faculty in addition to Ms. Tupe included department chair Janice Burke, OTR/L, PhD, Laura Gitlin, PhD, and Arlene Lorch, OTR/L, MS.

About the Authors

Adrienne Tarola, BA, is Public Relations Coordinator and Debra Tupe, OTR/L, MPH, MS, is an Instructor in the Department of Occupational Therapy, both at the Jefferson College of Health Professions, Thomas Jefferson University. Please address questions and comments to debra.tupe@jefferson.edu.