

## IT'S A QUEER THING

The evening of April 25, 1994, is one I shall never forget. It was about five days into my two-week journey with the Venceremos Brigade to the island of Cuba. That evening, I was struck by feelings of peace and despair at the same time. All 140 members of the brigade had been working alongside Cubans to process tobacco that day. We had talked of many things in the tobacco barns, and I was beginning to get a sense of how Cuban society operates. It was not until that evening, though, that a fundamental difference between U.S. and Cuban society hit me.

For people of African descent living in the Western Hemisphere, Cuba is often considered "holy ground." It was to the island of Cuba that most African people were brought in captivity to the "new world."

Serving as a cruel Ellis Island for these African people, Cuba is where black ancestors were

killed, buried, born and sold. Enslaved people would be brought to Cuba to be processed and then sent to other parts of the Americas.

It was in the spirit of this history and in memory of these African ancestors that a bonfire was lit by African American members of the brigade that evening, and the African national anthem was sung.

During this event, painful declarations that had been made at a prior brigade meeting came flooding back on me. I was not alone in this flood. The flames of the bonfire leaping into the sky seemed to sear and cleanse the wounds that living in the United States had inflicted on so many. That there are so many homeless living on the streets in this country and that drugs are tearing whole sectors of the population apart was acknowledged. That the vast majority of men in U.S. prisons are African American and that so many African American women are raising their children on their own was said. And that poverty, AIDS, a lack of health care, discrimination, racism and hatred pervade parts of this society was also offered up. It was this collective pain that the bonfire addressed.

I am never able to see the United States so clearly as when I leave its borders and "look back" on my nation. The clarity and perspective that distance, and a change in culture, allows one is profound.

I was profoundly moved that evening to see again the degree to which race and race relations hinder us from realizing a truly free and democratic society.

I believe we, as a nation, are obsessed with race. I see it as one of the greatest causes of pain in our society and as a major stumbling block. Being in Cuba allowed me to see, by contrast, where we could go with regard to race relations in the United States. While I do not believe Cuban society is perfect, and I do acknowledge fundamental differences such as population size, and geography, I think we can learn a tremendous amount by looking at how Cubans coexist.

The Cuban populace is made up of Latino Cubans, African Cubans, and people of mixed Latino and African Cuban descent, or mulattos. From what I could tell, the population is nearly a third of each, with maybe slightly fewer mulattos. While I am sure some racism exists in Cuba, as it does everywhere, the ease with which Cubans of all races interact was refreshing to see. But possibly the greatest gauge of how well Cuban society is inclusive to all comes better from observing my fellow brigade members. As a white "American," I felt as if a weight



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Amina and Andrea at the 1994 May Day parade, Pinar del Rio, Cuba

## Cleansing old wounds

*Many people of all races are working hard to bring peace to the race wars in our country*

by Howard N. Dana



Campeños in Pinar del Rio, April 1994

had been lifted off my chest. I was very aware that I was in a society much freer about racial issues than the one I live in, in Portland, Oregon. For me to be able to physically feel such racial freedom could only have been a fraction of what people of color in the brigade were feeling.

This particular Venceremos Brigade was made

up of about one third people of color, primarily of African and Mexican descent. As we talked about race issues, it became clear that some had never known such a freedom from racial tension as they were experiencing, for the first time in their lives, in Cuba. The Cubans were very welcoming. African Cubans and mulattos could be seen at all

levels of society and within the government. Interracial couples are not given a second thought, and there is no segregation in cities and towns along racial lines. I cannot even begin to imagine what this must have been like for my friends of color. I know it felt great to me.

Cuba operates under a socialist system, in which the thinking is that Cubans are Cuban first and black or Latino or gay or lesbian second. In many ways they would argue that a person would not be called "African Cuban." He or she would be "Cuban African."

I kept wondering if this does not take away from the difference between cultures living together, or if this integration might result in such a melting of individuality that cultural diversity is lost. At least outwardly, this did not seem to be the case. There was plenty of evidence that both African and Latino cultures were treated with honor and, at cultural events each was represented with enthusiasm. One only needs to look at Cuba's rich dance history to see how Cuban culture has been enriched by its mixed heritage.

In the United States the response of cultural, ethnic pride as an answer to the theory of "the melting pot" has seen a rise in the acknowledgment and celebration of people's diversity. It has put the mark of a truly pluralist society on this country. But at what cost? I am not suggesting that we discontinue celebrations of Cinco de Mayo, or Chinese New Year, or Chanukah, or Lesbian, Gay, Bi Pride. But I wonder whether we are getting closer to or further away from the kind of unified diversity I got a glimpse of in Cuba. What we see on the news, and what we witness in our own cities and in our neighborhoods, suggests that we are very far from the goal of harmony. I do, however, think many people of all races, myself included, are working very hard to bring peace to the race wars in our country. I have no answers for how we will bring this peace about. I have been given hope that it can happen. It may not happen in our lifetime, but, as can be seen in small corners of this world, it is possible and well worth the effort.