

**Brandeis University**  
**CLUB DEL ESPENDRÚ Academic Summer Camp**  
Project Leader: Gabriel Fontes  
July – August 2019  
Cuba

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*"Since the start of the revolution until now you could define the situation in one word: scarcity... **It's like living in a country in a state of war... without ever having a war.**" – Mamerto, window cleaner and skateboarder from Havana in *Havana Skate Days* documentary.*

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**Abstract**

This project proposes an academic summer camp for Afro-Cuban youth in the Regla neighborhood of Havana called CLUB DEL ESPENDRÚ (The Fro Club). The month-long camp will offset the twin violences of racism and poverty by offering youth an opportunity to develop in four areas: expressive arts, Afro Cuban History, English language, and technology. The impact of this camp will be sustained by the skills learned, technology and school supplies purchased, and partnerships strengthened. The camp will be staffed by myself, a New England Public Radio (NEPR) staff member and an accomplished local team including Magia López and Alexey Rodríguez of Hip Hop group OBSESSION, and Tomás Fernandez Robaina, professor at the University of Havana. Developing young Afro-Cuban leaders and building collaborative relationships between people in the United States and in Cuba will ultimately support racial justice and harmony. That is, peace.

**Background**

While the Cuban revolution alleviated overall poverty rates, it did not account for the historical disadvantages of Afro-Cubans. This oversight accounts for the fact that today the majority of Afro-Cubans disproportionately suffer from poverty. Eighty percent of the working population in Cuba is employed by the government and the average salary is \$29 a month<sup>1</sup>. Most families supplement their low government wages through work in the tourist industry, others by receiving remittances from abroad. Afro Cubans are at a disadvantage in both of these areas. Most employers in the tourism industry prefer to hire lighter-skinned Cubans, and Afro Cubans are less likely to have family members living abroad who can send remittances. Children who live in poverty in Cuba are unable to afford the after school tutors that would enable them to continue studies at the university, and therefore move up in life.

**Project Description**

CLUB DEL ESPENDRÚ will enroll approximately fifteen youth ages 15-16 who are going into their final year of basic secondary education – the year they take university entrance exams. The camp will be open to youth from the Casablanca neighborhood of Regla. Students will be selected by our community partners based on an application that determines financial need and commitment. Programming will be held weekdays from July 8th through August 6<sup>th</sup>. The students will rotate through four classes. From 9:30AM-10:30AM students will take English with me. The curricula will center on analysis of American popular media and conversational practice in order to sharpen students' knowledge, diction, writing, and word choice. From 10:30AM-11:30AM students will take expressive arts with Magia López and Alexey Rodríguez. The curricula will mobilize rapping, singing, and visual arts to help students foment racial pride and express the reality of their lived experience. After lunch and play, students will join Tomás Fernandez Robaina from 12:30PM-1:30PM for an Afro-Cuban history course which will resuscitate Afro-Cuban historical figures and events that were omitted from school textbooks.

Finally, students will join Ethan Bakuli from 1:30PM to 2:30PM for a technology course. Students will learn audio and video journalism skills such as recording, editing, and interviewing techniques.

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<sup>1</sup> Escobar, Luz and Mario Penton Martinez. "Average Wages Rise but Nobody in Cuba Lives on Their Salary." *Translating Cuba*. July 16, 2017. <http://translatingcuba.com/average-wages-rise-but-nobody-in-cuba-lives-on-their-salary/>

In the process, students will learn how to use computers, which are still scarce among lower income Cubans, and which will give them huge advantages in the workforce. For the last weeks or so, the classes will blend together as students prepare for their final project: a 3-5 minute video or podcast, in English, that integrates tools and knowledge gleaned from all four classes.

### **Sustainability**

The impact of this grant will be sustained by the technology and skills learned. The three laptops, video camera, and school supplies will be left in Cuba for use in the future. This project deeply invests in a local team that already works well together and will continue Afrocentric community education work. Furthermore, this grant proposal and process have created language and materials for our local team to apply for future grants and a model to pitch to future American NGO's and partner organizations.

### **Community Partners**

When I was studying abroad in Havana in the fall of 2017, I had the great fortune of meeting a team of wonderful community leaders who lacked sufficient resources to realize all of their community education goals. This project will proffer them some amazing resources and a context to further develop their objectives.

The camp will be staffed by an accomplished team of artists, academics, and writers. Alexey Rodríguez and Magia López are two rappers from the groundbreaking hip hop group OBSESSION. These cultural icons have been leading community initiatives for over twenty years that focus on fomenting Black racial pride and identity through the arts. For instance, last summer they hosted a Black doll-making workshop for children. The project brought awareness to the lack of Black representation in children's toys. Magia and Alexey will lead the expressive arts curricula and will bring their wealth of knowledge to this project. Tomás Fernandez Robaina is a professor at the University of Havana and a researcher at the National Library in Havana. He has published groundbreaking works on Afro-Cuban history including *Antología del pensamieto antirracista Cubano* (Anthology of Antiracist Cuban Thought) and will be a valuable resource on this project. Ethan Bakuli is a journalist at New England Public Radio Media Lab, a ProPublic emerging reporter Fellow, and co-editor of a Black arts magazine entitled *Rebirth Project*. Bakuli brings experience teaching urban high school students video journalism skills and will be a big asset to this project. Together, our strong team will bring knowledge, experience, change, and a movement toward peace to the youth participating in this program which will impact them, and those around them, as they grow into adulthood.

### **Project Objectives:**

- Students will develop a 3-5 minute video or podcast in English
- Students will demonstrate growth from pre to post-evaluation on Cross Ethnic-Racial Identity Scale (CERIS)
- Students will write a 2-page paper exploring Afro-Cuban contributions to the development of peace and solidarity across the world.