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Essential things

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Essential things

The first step in finding your vocation is finding *yourself*— who you are and where you come from — and I took this step during my visit to Cuba over spring break. On this trip, sponsored by Furman's Center for Theological Exploration of Vocation, I had the opportunity to explore my family heritage, as both of my mother's parents were born in Cuba and have enriched my life with Cuban traditions.

My grandparents had emigrated to the United States by 1952, before the revolution, and made their final visit to Cuba in 1957. For them, Cuban history froze in that year; but in February, after being wished "*buen viaje*," I bridged that span of time as the first member of my family to visit Cuba in half a century.

San José de las Lajas, a town outside Havana, has always been on the itinerary for the CTEV's annual spring trip to Cuba. Yet it is also where my grandmother's sister, Matilde Camiña, now 93, lives with her granddaughter Suaima and her family. To my surprise, a local Baptist pastor had arranged for all of us to meet at his office on my first day in Cuba. And sure enough, on that rainy afternoon, my family pulled up in front of the office in their '49 Dodge, and I nervously rushed out to meet them for the first time.

It was surreal and joyful, exciting and daunting, and I exchanged hugs and greetings as the rest of my travel group watched from a balcony. I handed Matilde a photo of her sister, my *abuela*, and her family smiled as I shared news about my family back home. This emotional meeting was short, but we managed to gather twice more during my time in Cuba.

Although my Cuban family was always smiling, they told me about how hard life is for them. Suaima and her husband, Juan Carlos, have "good jobs" at a ceramics factory, but Suaima has taken leave to care for Matilde, who recently broke her hip, while Juan Carlos earns 295 Cuban pesos a month. That's equivalent to 14 U.S. dollars. In their apartment, Suaima and Juan Carlos share a bedroom with their two sons, and they use a flashlight to illuminate the rooms at night. The government provides food rations, slim by U.S. standards.

"We don't have luxuries," Suaima told me (in Spanish), "but we live a good life, and we value the essential things." The essential things are the relationships among family, friends and neighbors.

My family prepared me a special meal one evening — certainly fancy for them — but they told me not to be ashamed: "You're among family." That evening we traveled to meet my other great aunt, Herminia, and her granddaughters mentioned the local shortage of water. ("Life here is stressful; how can you have stress in the United States, where you have *everything*?" remarked one of their nieces.) But Herminia has four generations



The family of Suaima (third from right) and Juan Carlos (far left), ready to enjoy a special Cuban meal with Michael.

supporting each other under her roof, and all of them hope that relations between the United States and Cuba will improve so that more of our family can reunite more often.

My visit gave hope to my Cuban family and brought joy to my American family. Such an experience is rare under the U.S. travel ban, and I feel blessed to have fulfilled this mission.

But I have returned to the States with another sense of mission. In Cuba I felt connected not only with my family, but with each community I encountered. The lines of family blurred; whoever welcomed me as a brother, I embraced with kinship.

Who are my neighbors and my brethren, and where does my compassion stop? We each have gifts, and we also have the great responsibility to share them. Many of Cuba's people are waiting with open hands, empty from need but full of warmth, love and unity.

— Michael Vagnini

The author is a rising junior from Winter Springs, Fla., majoring in chemistry and Spanish.