

To paraphrase what a wise person once said,
 “A journey of a thousand miles
 begins with a single ... er ...

paper cut?”

Well, that's how my story began. It was a cold January day several years ago when I tossed out an envelope, among the many that had arrived that day in my school mailbox. It was a flyer for student travel to Cuba! (*Yeah, right ... like I'm going to pack up my music students and take them to Cuba?*) Into the wastebasket it went (along with the usual administrative memos). Later that day, something beckoned me to take that envelope out of the circular file and open it. That's when it happened. Ouch! A small paper cut. But, just then, wow, a tremendous journey began to unfold.

The letter was from *Canada-Cuba Sports and Culture* in Toronto, a group that is dedicated to bringing Canadian cultural and sports groups to Cuba to interact with Cubans, dispelling some of the myths about that country. “People-to-people” – *that sounded interesting*. The concept of having Dartmouth High music students perform with, and for, Cuban music students was intriguing. The more I thought about it, I liked it. And so, a dream took shape.

This dream became reality and evolved into not one, but two, performance tours to Cuba. In 2000, we took 70 Grade 11 and 12 musicians to Santiago de Cuba. And, in 2005, we took 80 musicians to Havana. Both tours turned out to be profound experiences for students and teachers.

Of course, as with any school trip, there were more than a few unforeseen complications that came up. This can be a bit daunting at times. For instance, how does one pack up two string basses for shipment to Cuba? Answer: two coffins! They were both practical and annoying. However, these sizable simple plywood boxes turned out to be of a significant weight. The sight of them rolling off an Airbus caused some alarm at Manzanillo and Varadero airports. However, they did the job in protecting our delicate musical instruments, while at the same time building muscles for those who toted them.

Yes, there is a myriad of details that a teacher encounters when taking students out of the classroom for travel, including fund-raising, accounting, travel

arrangements, passports, health forms and insurance. Dozens of other questions come up. For example, with mere weeks to go before the deadline, one student realized that since she had been born in Saint-Pierre, her passport would have to come from France. What about liability? Teachers are covered but not the chaperones. Another challenge! Is it possible to store musical equipment the day before departure at Halifax International Airport? (Yes!) Is it acceptable to perform rock music in Cuban schools? (Yes!) Are tampons readily available for purchase in Santiago de Cuba? (Absolutely not!) There are lots of details and challenges, but overcoming them was a learning experience. The fulfillment of the dream and the ultimate fundamental changing of the lives of students make all the work and effort worthwhile.

March Break, 2005, saw our group spending a week in Havana and in western Cuba, performing in schools for the arts. We had decided to prepare a music tour that would demonstrate all the various kinds of music that happen at Dartmouth High. Besides the concert band and jazz ensemble, we had a terrific rock band, a bagpiper, and a troop of Irish dancers and ... two of our teachers did some cool swing dancing. We also had one of our students give a speech in Spanish extending greetings from our school.

As a bonus, we brought along some badly-needed musical instruments to donate to our host schools. Even better, two of our chaperones happened to be Ken Rayment and his wife. Ken, who is supposed to be retired, repairs musical instruments in Halifax. He was greeted like Santa Claus, as most of the instruments that the students were using were in terrible shape. The Rayment's did musical triage at several schools when children lined up with their ailing horns that were somehow held together with all manner of imaginative means.

Some 80 students, with all their musical instruments and equipment, and 12 brave adults provided a glimpse of Dartmouth High's music room to Cuban schools. In exchange, we were fortunate to see and hear young Cuban musicians demonstrate how they approach the same art. The resulting waves of experiences, emotions, sensations and memories left us all profoundly changed people. It was all worth it to see the looks on the faces of

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of our students as they performed “O Canada!” in a foreign land, and to witness the boisterous response of the Cuban students when we followed with their anthem.

We have many vivid memories that will remain forever. Such as: driving through poor neighbourhoods of narrow streets and crumbling row houses, having all 92 of us jammed into the living room of a Cuban master percussion teacher for an afternoon demonstration of Afro/Cuban performance by his students – everyone sharing in dance despite language barriers.

Also, it was neat to see some of our students play baseball with Cuban students. Music and baseball are two great international languages. We were astonished when we witnessed the extremely high level of musicianship of Cuban students. There was further astonishment when we saw what poor condition most of their instruments were in and the lack of sheet music. We watched an elementary school class working on arithmetic, using the same piece of paper over and over again, until holes appeared, and then, finally, the sheet being replaced. Later on, one of my students began to cry when she realized that the handwritten sheet of clarinet music that was given to her by a Cuban student was one out of the five pieces that comprised the young Cuban musician’s entire collection.

Cuba being “off the beaten path” is a paradox. Yes, the infrastructure is falling apart, most people have little

in material possessions and the governance is strict. But the people are enthusiastically resilient and proud of what Cuba has accomplished in its own way, despite the odds. After our first tour to Santiago, some of our students commented on how lively and full of people and music the downtown streets were at night. Others noticed that Cubans don’t seem to pay attention to clocks – if you can find one! Two old gentlemen in Havana were playing chess at a small table set up in the middle of a narrow street. In Cuba, the bus drivers will drive a few blocks out of the way rather than insist on their right-of-way. No one seems in a rush. Our concerts didn’t have to start on time; after all, theirs don’t.

Cuba is a country that is chugging along with its material shortages, but ready to proudly share its treasures of culture, history and scenery. Not tending to be a particularly shy group, our DHS students learned that Cuban students were anxious to exchange conversations, which could be quite free-wheeling, from pop-culture to sports to music, to politics. They also learned that, with politics, no one strays very far from the government line.

Back home, in our little music room, and throughout our rambling old school, the experiences that these students who have “seen life on the other side” have reverberated around the hallways in and out of many classrooms for many years now. Many parents have contacted me to

say how their children returned home as changed persons, how they opened up in awareness of how fortunate Canadians are, have thought about value systems, social systems and, in many cases, talked animatedly with their parents for the first time in years! One mom and dad told me how their previously mute, sullen son kept them up well into the wee hours of the morning, exploding with conversation about all that he had seen and felt in Santiago.

Some of you, no doubt, are thinking: *OK, that’s easy to do with music, but I can’t see doing it in my subject area.* Absolutely not true!

Education of our students and ourselves outside our classrooms can be as boundless as we allow it to be, or as impossible as we allow ourselves to accept it. Yes, there are restrictions and considerations, and there is always going to be some risk. But ... the rewards! The soul-touching rewards that your students will reap, and the satisfaction of being a part of such an experience, make it all worth it. With luck, you will return with your sanity intact as a bonus!

Allow your mind to visit the gray areas where practicality, curiosity and creativity mix beyond the familiar black-and-white. Perhaps you will find a new idea hiding in the dark area of rejected thoughts in a wastebasket, as I did, and develop a dream of your own.

But, watch out for paper cuts!

Terry Hill is a retired teacher from Halifax Regional School Board.

Terrance E. Hill

A native of Welland, Ontario, Terrance Hill is a graduate of the University of California/Davis, where he received his undergraduate and graduate degrees in music composition and music education. During those years he studied with several composers, including avant-gardists John Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Richard Swift (12 tone theory), and music education author Albert MacNeil who wrote the series of music texts that were adopted by Nova Scotia's Dept. of Education for use in the province's schools.

Mr. Hill recently retired after teaching music in Nova Scotia for 34 years. Arriving from California, he began the first instrumental music programme in Cape Breton in 1970 when Breton Education Centre first opened. BEC bands traveled coast to coast, representing Nova Scotia at CMEA in Vancouver, earning highest marks at several national jazz festivals, and helping musicians such as Kirk MacDonald and Tom Roach get their start. He moved on to Halifax/Dartmouth where he taught at Dartmouth High School for many years. The Dartmouth High bands have traveled internationally, having twice toured in Cuba, several tours to the U.S., and around the Maritimes. The DHS Band was recorded for CBC Radio 2 broadcast after students composed a work for concert band, composition being a major component of DHS Music. The concert band was invited to perform at Symphony Hall in Chicago in 2001, a journey that was cancelled because of 9/11.

Mr. Hill has been an active studio musician (piano with CBC), a jazz musician and church organist. He has received several commissions to compose works for diverse settings, including CBC themes, the Nova Scotia Youth Orchestra, City of Sydney Bicentennial, Lieksa Youth Wind Ensemble from Finland, and numerous other pieces. He served for many years as Editor for NSMEA publications and was involved with the very first Provincial secondary music education curriculum committee in the '70s, and now the new committee that is meeting this year to make revisions.

Mr. Hill taught in the music education programme at Dalhousie University for 12 yrs, taught piano and directed symphonic band at the University of California/Davis, and has been involved with the UPEI music camps. As an adjudicator and clinician, he has traveled the Atlantic Provinces working with young musicians and composers. He has served as a music facilitator with Canada-Cuba Sports and Culture in Toronto/Havana. Mr. Hill is Co-Manager of the Nova Scotia Youth Wind Ensemble, and is on the faculty of the Nova Scotia Community College this year.

Currently residing in Dartmouth, Mr. Hill is thoroughly enjoying retirement while remaining active in various facets of music and music education. His wife Dianne is a Minister at Woodlawn United Church in Dartmouth, where he serves as church organist and pianist.