

About Our Connection to the Herrera Family in Cuba

Over the last two years, salsa dancers from Saskatoon have been instructed by a young dancer named Jesús Manuel Vinent Herrera when they travel to Havana for intensive classes organized by Saskatoon Salsa Dance Company. We have been impressed by his character – which is built on integrity, kindness and generosity. Through Jesús, we have also gotten to know the two incredible women who raised him – his mother Josefina América Herrera Iglesias and his grandmother Mercedes Iglesias Moshado. Over the course of a two-year friendship, this family has earned our trust and admiration. In spite of their many unmet basic needs they remain self-reliant, never asking for anything from their Canadian friends.

The Disappointment

Saskatoon Salsa Dance Company had offered Jesús a contract to be the lead dancer and director of their 10th Anniversary Showcase this summer. Unfortunately, the visa application was denied. So a number of individuals in the Saskatoon dance community decided to do something that would make a difference in the lives of the Herrera family.



Jesús Vinent Herrera – professional salsa dancer/instructor



Grandma Mercedes and América Herrera (school teacher) in the kitchen of their humble home. The family cooks on a two burner hotplate. Recently Jesús has been able to buy a rice cooker which has significantly decreased the amount of effort it takes to make a meal. They do not have running water or sewer. They travel long distances by bus to and from work.

A Bit about Cuba – Past and Future

Cuba's economy has similar struggles as other third world nations, but with the added complication of being run by a communist government and being denied access to the U.S. market for the last 58 years.

Cubans do not pay for their housing, education or basic medical care, but they do need to be able to cover the rest of the costs of life - utilities, transportation, clothing, communications, and most of their food.

At the beginning of the Cuban Revolution, the government issued a monthly food allowance, based on the number of people in a household, and this provided a healthy subsistence level of nutrition to all Cubans regardless of income. Over time, however, the value of this food allowance has decreased until it is no longer any more than the equivalent of a coupon book. Without cash, people cannot access food.

While locally grown food is inexpensive, Cuba does not have enough food processing industries to give its citizens local prices for many staple items such as cooking oil. Anything that is imported is out of reach of most Cubans budgets. Condiments such as mayonnaise are a luxury reserved for special celebrations. In a Cuban grocery store a small bag of imported grocery items can be expected to cost about \$20.00



Jesús' younger brother, Luis Miguel, capturing the scene of a family celebration feast.

However, salaries for Cubans are shockingly low – between \$10 and \$45/month for most Cubans. Some highly trained specialists (medical specialist, engineers) may earn \$80/month. The highest paid sports heroes may make \$150/month. The only way to earn more is to work with tourists. Tips and/or a direct service contract with even one tourist makes a huge difference in the annual income of a Cuban family. However, working in the tourism industry is very competitive and very seasonal work. It is also common for employees in the tourist industry to be treated badly by their employers. Employees are vulnerable and expendable.

But the opportunities in Cuba are changing rapidly...

In the last five years Cuba has seen incredible changes – the right to own a personal computer or cell phone and access to the internet (albeit a very slow and unreliable connection), the right to travel without an exit visa and the right to own and sell their homes.

Slowly a middle class based on entrepreneurship is becoming possible, but few have the capital to invest.

As icy diplomatic relations between Cuba and the U.S. begin to thaw, wise Cubans can start to position themselves to take advantage of the economic opportunities that are coming in the real estate market and small business opportunities, especially those serving the growing tourism industry.

The Plan

When our hopes to be able to host and employ Jesús in our salsa dance community were denied this summer, a small group of his friends started talking. As our conversations grew and drew in other resourceful people, we realized that we had a window of opportunity to position a very deserving family for a dignified life of self-sustainability. This single dinner and dance fundraiser may well be enough to invest

in a bed and breakfast home and a salsa lesson/Havana city tour business. With the support of a professional business planner in Saskatoon and the family investigating options in Cuba, they are well on their way to having a solid business plan in place for the upcoming tourist season. To us, this is one event to organize; to the Herrera family, it is the chance of a lifetime!

Thank you and Follow Up

Thank you to each and every one of you who supported this event in some way. We would like you to know that, due to the generous sponsorship of City Perks Café and Danceland DJs, as well as the volunteer effort and donations of many kind individuals, almost all of your money will go directly to the Herrera family's business venture.



Jesús and his family would like me to send you their most heartfelt gratitude:

“Casí no puedo creer que existen personas como Ustedes! Nunca he imaginado que habría posibilidades como esas para mi! No sé cómo agradecerles – sólo sé que rezo por la gente de Saskatoon, y le agradezco a la vida y a Dios por darme la oportunidad de conocerles. Espero poder algun día demostrarles y brindarles mi sincera amistad y profundo respeto. Y por supuesto, si pueden visitar Cuba, siempre serán bienvenidos en mi casa!”

“I almost cannot believe that people like you exist! I have never imagined there would be possibilities like this for me! I don't know how to give you my appreciation – I only know that I pray for the people of Saskatoon and I give thanks to life and to God for giving me the opportunity to know you. I hope that one day I can offer you my sincere friendship and show you my deep respect. And of course, if you can visit Cuba, you will always be welcome in my house!”

Those interested in hearing a follow up to this story, or in connecting with the Herrera family when you travel to Cuba – you would be most welcome to contact Kim Miller at kim.miller@sasktel.net