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Cuba solidarity, what else can we do?

written by Deisy Francis Mexidor

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Cheryl LaBash (left) and Lisa Valanti, next to their cars with "Cuba Sí" license plates.

Car license plates in the United States have the standard format of 150×300 mm. The top part shows the name of the state, and the bottom part usually has a motto or phrase famous in the state. This is the story told by Cheryl LaBash, the owner of a Toyota with an unusual, interesting, and supportive license plate circulating around that country.

So many I can't remember, Cheryl LaBash replies with a smile when asked how many times she has visited Cuba. She is one among countless Americans who call for

the rapprochement of the two shores with the love, energy, resilience, and nobility of a people who have managed to survive against all odds.

She is like an industrious ant when it comes to Cuba. How does Cheryl manage to be in Detroit one day, Boston the next, and Washington, D.C., the next? And in that back and forth, she drives her dark gray Toyota on roads, highways, and streets with a singular license plate: "Cuba Sí".

The idea, she says, came from Lisa Valenti, founder of the Pittsburgh-Matanzas Sister Cities Association for 30 years. She has the same license plate on her car, and "then I said to myself, why not? Her action was my inspiration."



Cheryl LaBash. Photo: Deisy Francis Mexidor

So "we have mine from Michigan and Lisa's from Pennsylvania. That means there are 48 other opportunities for people to show their love for Cuba in this way, with this special license plate," she said, referring to the possibility in the remaining 48 states.

Sometimes, she is surprised when other drivers honk their horns as they pass by, and she says: "It obviously means there is a feeling for Cuba," and she proudly insists that "my car has driven from coast to coast and even all over Florida."

In addition to the license plate, Cheryl carries with her a "major league baseball cap with the "C" on the front and a Cuban flag folded in the wallet. It's a good way to make sure Cuba is always there, too."

A shortwave radio

Soft-spoken and noble-looking, Cheryl is a woman who has long embraced the struggle for justice and human rights in a general sense. Although she feels her heart is young, she says she has "lived several years."

It was her grandparents, immigrants from Eastern Europe, who raised her and forged her personality back in Arizona in a period that sensitized her to the struggles of migrants coming to the U.S. without speaking English.

"I lived through the Vietnam War period, which opened the eyes of a generation, as Palestine is doing today to a much more educated and advanced generation, who realize that war is something more than an accidental policy."

Her husband back then, a graduate student at a Midwestern university, was in danger of being drafted and sent to war, and "part of our activism consisted of listening to Radio Habana Cuba's English-language programming on a shortwave radio to update ourselves with real news about Vietnam."

Since those youthful years, Cheryl has "participated in activism to end America's many unjust wars, abroad and at home."

"The harshest police brutality against black youth and immigrants in the global south, militarization of local police, repression of the rights of workers and the poor,

an end to racism, oppression of women and LGBTQ2 people. For me, all of this is connected to capitalism and its highest imperialist stage,” she warned.

Today, we too are challenged by climate catastrophe, and it’s all happening in real-time, LaBash said.

For the co-chair of the National Cuba Solidarity Network, which brings together more than 70 organizations in the country, it is a shame that the U.S. government is not in tune with the numerous “resolutions to remove Cuba from the list of state sponsors of terrorism and end the blockade are calling for.

Those of us who live here in the United States – she argues – have a great responsibility to put an end to the unjust economic war that our country is waging against Cuba, the Cuban government, and, ultimately, the Cuban people.

“Whatever the outcome of the 2024 elections, our main task is to build ties of friendship and solidarity with the Cuban people through travel, collaborative projects and awareness-raising,” the activist considered.

LaBash believes that, clearly, these are dangerous and unstable times, with rampant genocide in Gaza, the impoverishment of the working class for the benefit of the world’s ultra-rich, and the threat of a third world war looming over us all.

“Cuba’s internationalism is a wonderful example of José Martí’s statement that Homeland is Humanity and an alternative to the global conflict we see today.”

At first glance

Cheryl LaBash ratifies that she loves Cuba because “it is a small but powerful example of how humanity can move forward even when faced with a cruel and aggressive economic, financial, commercial, and media blockade. “It is an inspiration and a northern star, which has now moved south, of how human beings

can live with dignity.”

From that first time, in 1985, that she traveled to the Caribbean nation, as happens with lovers, she was captivated by that “indomitable and rebellious Cuba”. It was the celebration of May Day, where she was representing her union at the Detroit Health Department, that had a life-changing impact on her.

“The scandal of black infant mortality in the United States and in Detroit in particular made headlines in the media. In Cuba I saw with my own eyes the care and resources provided to pregnant women and the special care provided to all children so that they can develop fully.”

Meanwhile, she laments that “black infant and maternal mortality remains shamefully high in the United States. Cuba shows another way, and I just learned that they have extended maternity leave to 15 months. This is just a dream for most new parents in the United States.”

That clash with the Island in the 1980s allowed her to help start a labor solidarity organization to exchange with the Central de Trabajadores de Cuba.

“We organized two worker delegations per year in the early 1990s. I then helped in the first Pastors for Peace caravans with Rev. Lucius Walker that challenged the blockade at both the Mexican and Canadian borders. I often don’t go, but I help with the preparations.”

In 2009, a year after retiring, she returned for May Day with a delegation from the International Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union.

For the freedom of the Cuban 5

It was the struggle for the release of Gerardo Hernández, Ramón Labañino, Antonio Guerrero, Fernando González, and René González from US prisons that intensified

her commitment to Cuba.

"The International Committee for the Freedom of the Cuban Five (currently the International Committee for Peace, Justice and Dignity), led by Graciela Ramirez in Cuba and the late Alicia Jrapko, in the United States, organized creative projects such as the national tour of La Colmenita", and she confesses that at that stage she learned that "you can never stop fighting". And looking back at that memorable time Cheryl reflects that "in a few months it will be ten years since their freedom in December 2014. That victory made us cry with joy when Gerardo, Ramón and Tony finally returned home".

"It ended that terrible chapter. That tremendous struggle to free the Five was such a victory. It makes me so I am happy when I now see the photos with their families, next to their people", adds Cheryl, who affirms that the closing of the special presentation of La Colmenita in 2011 is still a driving force and inspiration for her.

"I remember the children concluding the play with the cry, 'Now what more can we do!' and, you know, that's my motto right now and every day. What more can we do to get Cuba off the SSOT (State Sponsors of Terrorism) list? What more can we do to end the blockade and let Cuba live?"

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