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The advertisement features a tablet on the left displaying the cover of 'World Next Door MAGAZINE'. The cover has a photo of a young girl and the headline 'DECLARING HOPE' with a sub-headline 'THE GREAT, GRACEFUL ABSURDITY OF LAUGHTER IN A LAND OF TEARS'. To the right of the tablet, the text reads 'The world's absolute best digital social justice travel magazine. Also the only one.' Below this text are three logos: 'Download on the App Store', 'GET IT ON Google play', and 'Available at amazon'.

Meet the Founder



ALIAS.

(Real life, not the CIA double agent TV series from the early 2000s, though that would be awesome, too.)

By Brooke

One of the things that made this World Next Door assignment particularly difficult (besides the communism and confusion and general inability to communicate) was the fact that our host organization has been blacklisted in Cuba.



We were greeted each morning with a tiny cup of Cuban espresso filled with sugar.

Before we left for Cuba, we had the chance to spend a week in Miami with our host ministry, EchoCuba, as though we were part of the team. We attended their meetings, ordered from the lunch menu with the staff, and were greeted each morning with a tiny cup of Cuban espresso filled with sugar.

I was dying to know how they'd gotten their start, and why anyone anywhere would blacklist this magical group of coffee-offering people, especially the exact people they existed to serve!

As with all things Cuba, the history of this organization and its founder, Teo, was intriguing. I was especially interested to learn how they found themselves at odds with Cuba's Council of Churches.



Teo Babun leading a meeting at ECHO

Teo, having been born and raised in Santiago de Cuba, remembers the revolution clearly through the eyes of an 11 year-old. His family—one of the wealthiest in Eastern Cuba—owned successful businesses that employed thousands in the community.

“Everybody helped Fidel and the revolutionaries,” Teo explained. “We created underground networks to send medicines and religious materials and food. It was cool—here were these guys coming out of the mountains

with beer, running around and directing traffic, and these were people *we knew* because so many left to join the revolution: our teacher, driver, friend were coming back with beer and new freedoms.”

It was such an unexpected twist, he explained, for Fidel to have come to power for the purpose of cleaning the government and calling for clean elections and democracy, and then to turn right around and start confiscating everything and putting people to death. The same class that funded the revolution – which included Teo’s family – became the ones who had to leave to avoid the firing squad.



Teo on set with CNN Miami morning news

Teo and his family ended the summer hopping a plane to Miami thinking it was an end-of-summer vacation. Fidel’s quick change would never last, they thought, and the family assumed they’d be home within a few weeks once the US got involved. No one could have predicted the Bay of Pigs failure, the Kennedy assassination, the Soviet Bloc growing, an atomic threat, and the Cold War.

Eight months later, they realized they would not be going back and finally unpacked their suitcases, enrolled in school, learned English and began assimilating.

Fast-forward 40 years.

Teo was an American businessman with a family of his own.

“One of my businesses was a private investment fund for Cuba, because we were anticipating that after the fall of the Soviet Bloc, Cuba would go the same route and we would have the chance to invest in the new Cuba. I went to Jacksonville to meet with a large group of businessmen to answer investment and infrastructure questions, but when we sat down, the first question was, “Tell us about the Christian church in Cuba. What’s going on?””



A church in Veradero, Cuba

Teo had no idea they were Christians. Neither did he have any idea how the church was faring in communist Cuba. Almost no one knew what was going on, but the group of businessmen who had a heart for the Christian church continued gathering at various clubs around Miami to share news of Cuba.

At the time, the Church was experiencing rebirth. The Cuban government had shut down the Church and declared themselves atheist in 1962, so the church was underground until 1989.

In 1989 Jesse Jackson went to Cuba to negotiate the release of some prisoners. Fidel was so proud to have Jesse Jackson in Cuba that when they were on national TV and Jesse Jackson was like, “Hey, why don’t you let the church operate?” Fidel said, more or less, “Okay.”

The church, in effect, sprang up cautiously in the early 1990’s within certain parameters, and when the pope visited in 1998, Christians started coming out of the woodwork.

Hundreds of people would show up at the meetings in Miami, Teo explained, to learn from each other how to get in and out and what the needs were. The Church was being helped in Cuba through ad-hoc ministries, so they decided to create a group: Vision for a Christian Cuba. It was informal at first, just meeting every month and inviting ministries in Miami and other parts of the US to come talk about how to help the church in Cuba.

After a few meetings, some of the members wanted to formalize. They took over another Cuban organization’s 501c3 (they had become inactive after the board was split on whether or not to provide humanitarian aid while Fidel was in power) and changed the name to EchoCuba in 1995, standing for Evangelical Christian Humanitarian Outreach to Cuba, Inc.



An EchoCuba sign hanging in their office in Miami

“We created a board right away and immediately took all the board members to Cuba. We sat down with the Cuban Council of Churches and got the legal permissions and visas. It looked like a promising partnership,” Teo said.

EchoCuba began first with humanitarian aid: wheelchairs, food and a large amount of medical supplies. They raised the money and shipped ten containers to Cuba. All of them were assigned to the Council of Churches for collection and distribution on the ground by EchoCuba’s local pastors and partner liaisons.

When the ten containers arrived in Cuba, however, the Council of Churches gave eight containers to the Cuban government, and distributed the other two containers to whomever they wanted.

“We were in shock,” Teo said, “and we tried to explain that we had a donor base and a credibility issue, but they didn’t care.”

The officials responded with, “You have all the aid, you’re the rich countries, you should give it to us, and we shouldn’t even thank you. We know better than you who should get it.”

“It was a huge wake up call,” Teo said. “We decided not to bring any more aid down through the Council, and they got really mad at us for that.”

As ministries from the Vision for a Christian Cuba group continued traveling in and out of Cuba, the government specifically directed them to stop working with EchoCuba. People would arrive in Miami on the way back from Cuba and say, “I’m not allowed to talk to you, but I’m calling to say please don’t send me emails or make phone calls. I can’t communicate with EchoCuba, or Cuba won’t accept aid from us.”

That’s how Teo first knew what was happening.

His suspicion was confirmed when the Vision For a Christian Cuba meetings were abandoned by ministries who had previously all worked together openly. Everyone had always signed in at the meetings, and it turns out, someone at the meeting had given a copy of the sign-in sheet to the Cuban government.

Anyone on that list who arrived in Cuba from any ministry was asked to leave the country. The government would say to the ministry, “You attended a meeting in Miami sponsored by EchoCuba, so you can’t come in.”

“We started getting phone calls from ministries saying ‘We’ve been kicked out and we can’t come to the meetings anymore!’ People were asking us to write letters to the Cuban government saying we were not working with them. We would write the letters, but the Echo letterhead itself implicated those ministries with us. Even just their association with us hurt them. It was Cuba’s goal to isolate us from every other Christian ministry.”

But EchoCuba pledged to continue empowering the churches and pastors in Cuba they had originally established partnerships with. They just stopped using their name to do it, and they decided to work outside the Council of Churches. Instead, they started matching churches and individuals in the US directly with individual churches and ministries in Cuba.

“By that time,” Teo explained, “we knew enough about how the churches were structured to access them. Word got out that we were providing assistance, and they started approaching us.”



A Religious Freedom program binder at the EchoCuba office in Miami

EchoCuba began with different humanitarian projects, like powdered milk distribution and disaster relief, and used those windows as opportunities to build relationships with local pastors and expand their efforts. They quickly began sponsoring pastoral leadership trainings, seminary students, religious freedom programming and began providing theological resources through people entering the country, one by one.

EchoCuba now maintains partnerships with hundreds of pastors, congregations, seminaries and ministries all over Cuba, with the common goal of reaching Cuba for Christ and for connecting North American churches with Cuban churches for fellowship, support and resource distribution.

All without using their name.