

“(UBA”): A deep look into the real Cuban life

By Alexandra Rossi M.

After looking through the 120 pages of Jack Kenny's recent book *"Cuba"*, you feel like you have seen an x-ray of the real Cuban soul. The hardcover book, published by Corazon Press in Michigan, features 106 photo-essays of life in Cuba today.



Elderly people, children, teens, brides, animals, men and women are featured in the black-and-white full-page photographs. Their dreams, despairs, joys and faith are printed on every page. The photos tell the truth about the island, a truth far from our reality but close to us every day through the media or personal experiences.

"It is my hope to share the Cuba I have come to know and the people I've met along the way - a generous, innovative and welcoming people," says Kenny. *"I have been fortunate to be able to visit the only country in the world that is off-limits to most Americans."*

Jack Kenny traveled about 30 times to Cuba during the past decade. His first trip was in April 1996, when he visited a friend who was making a documentary film in Havana.

He was *"fascinated by the architecture and old cars, but realized that Cuba was far different than expected. The Cuban people became the focus of my work. People asked aren't you afraid? Isn't it dangerous? You're being followed. Where's Cuba?"* he said.

Showing Cuba to Americans

Kenny first created a web site to show the real Cuba to the people of the US. The site www.cuba-photo.com has 4,000 pictures and is a free-use webpage for educational purposes. He started buying and selling art and photography to subsidize his work. After the turn of the millenni-

um, he reverted to his beloved black-and-white format and put together a traveling exhibit. *"Cuba, Revolution Then & Now"* - a 70 piece show - traveled to universities and galleries. The book *"Cuba"* is a follow up to that exhibition.

Jack Kenny and his camera traveled throughout the island visiting towns

of all sizes and meeting all kinds of people. *"I'm interested in a look at ordinary life in Cuba - no tourism, no government"*, he says.

His work is documentary style with no set-up. He was there before and after last year's hurricane season and his photos reveal the devastation. *"I was not there for Ivan (or Charlie) which destroyed many of the wooden houses of Playa Baracoa, but have returned several times to visit friends there and to take back 'before' photos to the residents"*, commented Kenny. Since the publication of the book, Hurricane Wilma backwashed into Playa Baracoa and demolished much of the seafront houses. *"Playa Baracoa has been devastated by those 3 hurricanes over the past two years and is struggling to survive. Most of the residents are still there and living in what is left of their homes,"* states Kenny.

Understanding Cuba

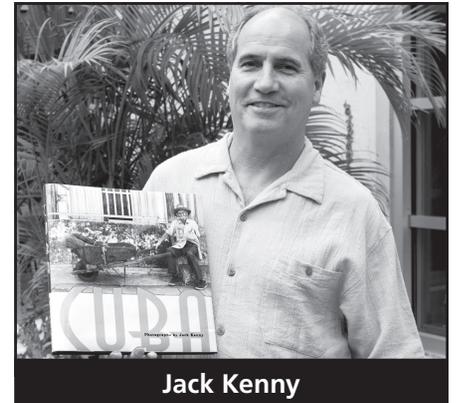
After this ten-year project, Kenny knows Cuba well, and has made many friends all over the island. *"Mostly, I've found them innovative and resilient,"* he opines about Cubans, and states that he has learned a lot from them. *"I've learned the value of family in a difficult situation and learned to appreciate what is important in life,"* he commented. *"The people of Cuba brought out the photographer in me. I had, for the previous 7 or 8 years, worked mostly as a studio photographer specializing in black-and-white nudes. I have photographed some in Mexico and in the*

U.S., but I never found the incentive to carry my work further than a personal level. I tried to take the politics of Cuba out of the equation and let the common man speak for himself."

Michigan native Kenny says U.S. policies toward Cuba are antiquated and need to be overhauled to reflect today's reality and the needs of the both countries' citizens.

"The trade embargo harms Cuban citizens and does nothing positive except to give Fidel Castro a scapegoat for a failed economy," says Kenny. *"Travel restrictions rob Americans of the opportunity of meeting the wonderful people who inhabit this charming country. And allowing Cubans who safely flee and 'set foot' in America to remain here is totally immoral as it makes the U.S. an accomplice to the death of the many, many who drown in desperate, risky attempts to escape."*

Cuba got so deep into Kenny's heart that he is now involved in the Sister City organization. Thanks to his efforts, his hometown of Ann Arbor, Michigan, is sistering with Remedios, a small and very historic town in Cuba's Villa Clara province.



Jack Kenny

to my favorite 680, which were all high resolution scanned and printed [to] 4x6 inches," remembers Kenny. *"From that group, 175 were printed [in] 8x10 inches and the book was laid out on my living and dining room floors."* Then he chose the finalists. Although he planned to print only on the left side of the page with text on the right, he decided to go for a full book of photos, and that's what *"Cuba"* is.

The hardcover book was launched in September 2005. Kenny plans to launch a soft cover version and another book, this time using color photographs, within a year.



An artisan of emotions

Kenny's work is hand-made art. He uses traditional film cameras and puts his heart in every photo.

"I work mostly with 35mm for the spontaneity, but also use 120 [professional film size] format for a part of the work. I've gotten to know many of the subjects and have returned to take photos and to follow up on their lives. Some of them never knew that I took their picture even though I work with a 35-70mm lens and I'm always close to the subject."

Kenny chose 106 images out of over 1,000 photographs. It was a tough job. *"I had about 1,500 [photos] to work with and narrowed that down*

"Cuba" is currently available at Books & Books of Coral Gables, Miami Beach and Bal Harbor. It is also being sold in bookstores in New York and Michigan, as well as through the web site www.corazonpress.com.

"I want to thank the Cuban people for their openness and hospitality and for allowing me into their lives and into their homes," says Kenny. *"I hope that people will look at this book for what it is and not treat it a piece of propaganda. I try to be non-judgmental in my work and to show things simply and as they are. I have seen both the joy and the longing of life in Cuba and I want to share this with the peoples of both the U.S. and Cuba (and hopefully the rest of the world)."* ■