

Brian Stoops (right) hands over donated AIDS meds in Santiago de Cuba last January.

Southern Transport: Vermont Project Delivers AIDS Meds to Cuba

BY EUAN BEAR

Stowe – It becomes clear very quickly when talking to Brian Stoops that the high point of his life so far occurred last January. That's when he handed a packet representing \$15,000 worth of HIV/AIDS medications to a man named Leudis at a clinic in Santiago de Cuba.

The medications were donated by people living with HIV/AIDS who had changed drugs, or by the families, housemates, and partners of patients who had died. Stoops, who works with Vermont CARES as a peer advocate, organized the collection of meds that would otherwise have ended up in landfills or flushed down the toilet, and then he raised the money to go.

The trip, he said, wasn't the first time Vermont medical supplies had been sent to Cuba. In fact, since 2003, Caribbean Medical Transport (CMT) has delivered more than ten 40-foot shipping containers of supplies, vitamins and clothing to the island nation declared pariah by the U.S. government. The supplies go to Havana as well as to eastern and rural areas of Cuba. Each container holds about 4,000 pounds of supplies, and it costs about \$2500 to send it south. But last January's trip was the first time the group was able to send a delegation with the shipment.

"The Cubans are the friendliest, nicest people I've ever met," Stoops declared, "even the police. They said they didn't have anything against Americans, they know it's just their wacky government and our wacky government

butting heads."

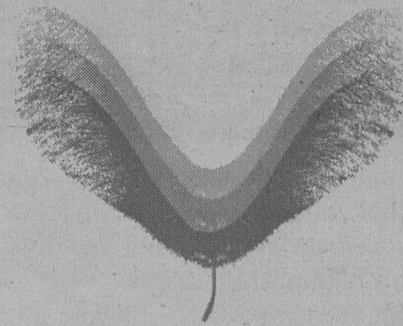
Marisha Kazeniak, the licensed travel coordinator for the group, was also impressed by "the immediate rapport between the folks in Cuba and the folks from Vermont," she said. The January trip was not her first time traveling to Cuba, more like her 15th. CMT is a homegrown Vermont project, she added, and its director, Rick Schwag, lives in Lyndonville.

Stoops said one of the most urgent needs of the Cubans is lubricated, U.S.-made condoms. "They don't like to use Chinese made no-lube condoms. They say they're inferior," Stoops said. Since his return from the January trip, Stoops has made contact with a condom maker, Global Manufacturing, which donated 1,000 lubricated condoms for the next shipment.

The group, Caribbean Medical Transport of Vermont, is licensed by the United States Department of Commerce to deliver its medical supplies to communities throughout Cuba. It is organizing a new trip to Cuba to assist in medical projects including continued work with the AIDS community, according to Kazeniak. Individuals interested in traveling to Cuba with CMT in July must have experience in the health field, (including but not limited to experience with AIDS work), experience in the delivery of humanitarian aid, or technical expertise related to the delivery of goods through CMT.

The July trip is focused on visiting health care facilities, meeting with handicapped and HIV-positive people who are supported by CMT donations, and determining what additional needs the group might be able to meet. As a follow-up to this visit, CMT will send up to 20,000 pounds of medicine and supplies to the facilities and individuals the group visits. Travel is scheduled for July 8-15 and space is limited. ▼

For more information on the project and qualifications for travel, contact Caribbean Medical Transport at 802-864-4334, or 802-626-5578, cuba@together.net or www.cubacaribe.com.



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How To Contact Us:

90 main street
p.o. box 1263
burlington, vermont
05402-1263
p. 802-860-6236
f. 802-860-6315
info@samarafoundation.org
www.samarafoundation.org

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