

My trip to Cuba proved that anything was possible.



Amilton's Travel Story

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Amilton Baptista[/caption]

When Amilton was in college at Umass Boston, he was chosen by his Africana Studies professor to go on a trip to Cuba, sponsored by the United Nations. He had been helping his professor edit a documentary on Cuba, and jumped at this opportunity to experience the Cuban culture for himself. "This was a once in a lifetime opportunity so I knew I had to take advantage." He and his group sailed on a replica of a Spanish slave ship from the Bahamas and up the northern coast of Cuba, visiting the seaside cities of Matanzas and Havana.

Amilton says about his experience, "It made me appreciate being out of my comfort zone and having to adapt to the culture that was surrounding me." He found that as a person of color, he experienced privilege in Cuba, whose population is about 2/3 Black and mixed-heritage. The Cuban people were warm and welcoming, in stark contrast to the negative, America-hating portrayal of Cubans that Amilton had heard from the media in the US. "I realized how much influence the media has on the way that people think."

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Amilton also discussed what it was like to be exposed to a different value system. "The most important thing is that Cubans value humanity over materials. Although Cuba is not rich with material things they are exceedingly rich in humanity and do not fit the definition of what Americans would describe as poverty." He saw that the Cubans valued culture: "People in Cuba appreciate culture and have many supportive programs for musicians, painters, and other arts. In Cuba, the man who teaches people how to paint on TV is a celebrity and is respected by the people." Amilton was amazed by the architecture and art of beautiful neighborhoods in Matanzas and Havana, where there were traditional colonial buildings as well as statues and sculptures. His experience left him with a lasting appreciation for Cuban culture.

"My trip to Cuba proved that anything was possible." Since then, Amilton has gone on to live

abroad in Cape Verde, Brazil, and the Dominican Republic. That first experience abroad opened the door, he says: “Had it not been for this trip I don't feel that I would've ever accomplished living in those places.” He was challenged during his trip to Cuba in ways that allowed him to grow.

By Elizabeth Meravi

At Leaders of the Free World we are passionate about the transformative power of international travel. To that end, we are highlighting the stories of several young, Black men whose international experience had lasting impact on their lives. In some cases, these experiences spurred them to make a difference in their communities.

About Amilton:

Amilton is a first generation Cape Verdean-American from Roxbury, MA. As a youth he faced much adversity and nearly dropped out of high school before realizing that an education could afford him a good life. Amilton will be joining the staff at College Bound Dorchester, helping young at-risk adult students who are in pursuit of their HISET Certificate (formerly GED) to get into and graduate from college. He's also on the advisory board and ambassador for the Bigger Than My Block Movement at www.btmb.org.

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