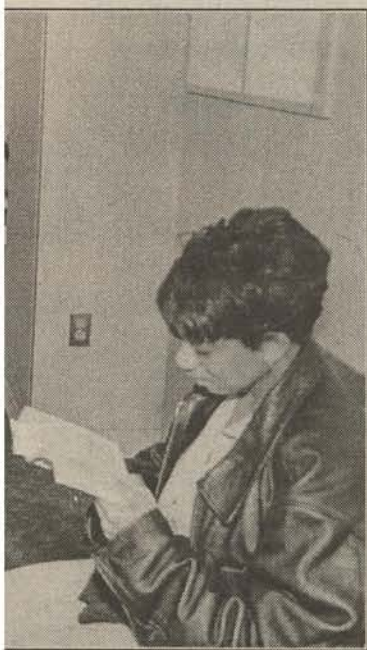


# The business of Cuba

## Local entrepreneurs invade the last bastion of Communism

BY MIKE MAYO  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

In the midst of the turmoil being played out in Havana, Miami and



mother Beatrice Willis, while the new South End Community Health Center (Linda Haas photo)

Washington over the fate of little Elian Gonzalez, two South End business owners made their own diplomatic efforts when they and 150 other young entrepreneurs hopped a charter flight to the capital of Cuba to help bridge the economic gap between the two nations.

Jodi Solomon of Concord Square and Appleton Street's Monique Muri spent a week making connections with Cuban politicians and citizens, hoping to establish their own links to the embargoed nation.

"The Cubans wanted to meet with people who would be more open than, say, our parents, who would remember when Castro came into power," Solomon said.

Solomon, who runs Jodi Solomon Speakers Bureau on Huntington Avenue, said the group she flew in with, the Young Entrepreneurs Organization — an international group of men and women under 35 who run businesses with an annual revenue of at least \$1 million — is attempting to lay the groundwork for future economic contact in Cuba.

"We are a group of young business owners willing and wanting to help. But we're at a loss because of what the U.S. government has placed on us, which is the embargo," said Solomon, whose company organizes lectures and provides keynote speakers such as Spike Lee, Patricia Ireland and Ken Burns.

"There was nothing but economic deterioration," she said. "There were people on the streets begging for soap."

While the trip, which ran from March 28 to April 2 and was sanctioned by the Cuban government, was Solomon's first, this was Muri's fourth excursion to Cuba. Licensed by the U.S. State Department to sell blood collection material sold by her company, RAM Scientific, Muri has purchase orders from Cuban clients.

'If the embargo was lifted, the economic opportunities would be enormous.'

— Jodi Solomon,  
Concord Square

"It was very different to go down with this group," Muri said of the Young Entrepreneurs tour. "It was hard to get close to the people. It was a typical format, hitting all the tourist spots. It was not the real Cuba."

But Muri admits there were benefits to being part of the high-powered group.

"The group allows for certain ministers to talk to us," Muri said. "That's normally hard to get exposure to."

Solomon said it was obvious that the nearly forty years of sanctions and embargo have stifled economic growth.

"There is no Internet access. Their electricity goes on and off

*Continues on page 13*

April 6, 2000 *South End News* Page 13

## Cuba

*Continued from page 1*

randomly," Solomon observed.

It is also a country where the government holds great sway over everyday life "[The government] has taken over people's private homes and turned them into factories and office buildings," Solomon said. It is also where "taxi drivers make more than doctors," she said.

Yet Muri notes that when it comes to the spiritual and social lives of Cubans, they're far more advanced than Americans.

"They value friends and family much more than material objects," she said. "They have strong values,

they're skilled, educated, very ethical. They do what they say they're going to do. It's a very safe environment. I traveled everywhere, and as a woman, I always felt safe," said Muri.

Despite its shortcomings, the island has great potential. Solomon said Cuba's population is 95 percent literate, a great advantage when seeking to employ people for skilled work. While the island's tropical beaches get the most attention, the countryside, Solomon said, is "truly beautiful."

Solomon also noted the Cuban government is among the leaders in genetic engineering and have made advances in hepatitis research. Nor are the people anti-American. "The people on the street harbor no ill will, no ill feelings

toward Americans," Solomon said. "With the Elian situation, they say that it's fueled by a handful of angry, wealthy Cubans in Miami."

In Solomon's field, the opportunities in Cuba are ripe: "There are convention centers just sitting empty. I coordinate meetings and provide keynote speakers, and with Cuba so close, there's a tremendous opportunity for international meetings."

If the embargo were lifted, the economic opportunities would be enormous, she said.

"They want us to teach them about technology. They encouraged us to contact our senators and congressmen to lift the embargo."

Still, Solomon said, "This may not change how Castro runs the country."



OUR PEOPLE IN HAVANA: Boston entrepreneurs Aaron Driben (L.) and Tom Skelly along with South Enders Jodi Solomon (second from L.) and Monique Muri last week in Havana. (Jodi Solomon photo)