

NAVIGATING THE DONATION PROCESS - Good Intentions Aren't Enough

By The Crew of SV Chapter Two

The crew of Chapter Two brought coloring books, crayons, pencils, stickers, small toys, toiletries, etc. to donate to Cuban children. The crew spent close to \$150.00, purchasing most of the items at the Dollar Store. To remain above board, we declared these items while clearing Customs. Officials proceeded to count and seal everything down to the very last pencil. Customs officials instructed us to contact the Ministry of Education (MINED) for further instructions on how to handle the sealed items.



As we dug deeper into donating items to a school or church, it became clear there are many obstacles. Locals informed us it was a mistake to declare these items. One individual helped by calling MINED (the Ministry of Education) to get instructions before we made the trip into Havana. MINED informed us the items could be prohibited as part of the embargo. They wanted us to secure clearance from the U.S. State Department to donate these items. Practically, we really didn't have the ability to expeditiously get such permission. We later discovered an online

Treasury document stating any donations have to be made through a Non-Government Organization (NGO).

Cubans we spoke with suggested that if we got permission to donate items to MINED, the items likely would never get to the intended recipients, but rather end up in the hands of the government officials or be sold. Others suggested that if we took our coloring books and pencils, etc, to a local school, they likely could not accept them in such a public environment. Gifts should be given very privately in Cuba. If someone is observed accepting gifts, they likely will have to turn it over to the government – so it is distributed evenly.

Cuba has customs regulations barring importation of items that might be purchased locally, thus supporting the local economy and aiding the government's ability to provide social services.



The items sealed by Customs upon our arrival had to be presented again when we cleared out to confirm they were not distributed. They will go back to the U.S. and be donated at a later date. If you must give away small items to people in Cuba, or to a local church, keep the quantities minimal. Find a local connected to a source for accepting donations. Keep it low key and private.

Another option is to go through another country, such as Canada. The group Pastors for Peace collects items from Canada and the United States and transports the items via Mexico to Cuba. They usually work with the Ministry of Health (MINSAP), the Ministry of Education (MINED), and *Instituto Cubano de Amistad con los Pueblos* (ICAP) in Cuba to get items to the people.



“Just don’t declare it” can be VERY risky. After traveling across the South Pacific for 18 months, checking into 30 different countries, we are familiar with the processes and difficulties of explaining large quantities of items, if found on the boat. If officials find something you should have declared, your check-in process will take a turn for the worse. If the items are weapons or illicit – your boat could be confiscated or you could be detained in a country without the rights you might be accustomed to in the U.S.

In our experience declaring questionable items has worked out fine. It seemed to establish a level of trust and made the process go quicker. So in Cuba, we really tried to be up front and not hide the larger amount of items, which the customs officials sealed. Despite the frustrations, we are now better informed about donating items to the Cuban people in the future.

(Photos by Peter Ryan)