

APRIL 2025

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Friendship Force of Denver
<https://www.facebook.com/friendshipforceofdenver/>

ABOUT THE CLUB

We meet at:

**Columbine United Church,
 6375 S. Platte Canyon Rd.,
 Littleton, 80123.**

We meet at 6:30 PM on the second Tuesday of most months. See up-to-date information on our website:

friendshipforcedenver.wildapricot.org

Guests are always welcome.
Come visit and bring your friends!

CLUB OFFICERS

President Irene Ludwig
 Vice President Gerry Forney
 Treasurer Les Eckstat
 Secretary Nancy Crocker

Newsletter Editor. Vacant
Newsletter articles are welcome
and are due on the 24th of the
month.

Contact us by sending an email to:

ffdboard@gmail.com

APRIL PROGRAM
TUESDAY, APRIL 8, 2025, 6:30 PM
Columbine United Church
 6375 S. Platte Canyon Road, Littleton, CO



6:30 PM: SOCIAL HOUR
7:00 PM: PRESENTATION
"TAKE A SUITCASE, SAVE A LIFE"

Kathy Reager is the local coordinator for **Not Just Tourists**, a charity that delivers medical supplies to needy clinics in more than 80 low-income countries. Not Just Tourists is an international not-for-profit organization that helps travelers bring surplus medical supplies, which would otherwise be thrown out. Kathy graduated from the International Tour Management Institute and worked for eight years as a guide in Alaska. She lives in Englewood and volunteers for the Fuller Center for Housing (an offshoot of Habitat for Humanity).



FROM THE PRESIDENT, IRENE LUDWIG

"NOT JUST TOURISTS: TAKE A SUITCASE, SAVE A LIFE"

I just learned about an amazing organization that provides suitcases full of medical supplies that tourists can deliver to those who can't afford them. **Not Just Tourists** started in Canada over 30 years ago and now has 15 chapters in the US. I was pleased to learn that NJT has a chapter in Denver. The local coordinator (**Kathy Reager**) gave me a suitcase to take to a clinic in Cuba. Kathy will be the speaker at

our April meeting on Tuesday, April 8.

People Not Politics

In the weeks before going to Cuba, I struggled with mixed feelings about the trip. I was curious and excited to visit this mysterious country. But I was apprehensive about supporting Cuba's totalitarian system. Cuba has a shortage of food, fuel, and medicine because of the US embargo that began in 1962. I spent time and energy researching humanitarian items to take to Cuba. I struggled with the knowledge that the people I wanted to reach weren't necessarily the people who would receive my gifts.

On March 4, Friendship Force International sent a message entitled "People Not Politics" to everyone on its mailing list. The message was: "In Uncertain Times, Connection Matters More Than Ever. Avoiding a country makes a statement. Visiting one makes a difference." That message put my gift giving goals into perspective. I was taking supplies to people who needed them and had to trust that some items would get to the right individuals.

Cuba 2025

Gerry and I spent ten days in Cuba on a trip that combined a taste of Cuban culture with amazing snorkeling in one of the least fished reefs of the Caribbean. We went with the **Oceanic Society** on a humanitarian and ocean conservation trip. We stayed on a live-a-board ship thirty miles from the mainland and snorkeled four times daily.



How was this a humanitarian trip? Our trip fees help support the park rangers and guides (and their families). The **Gardens of the Queen National Park** has fewer than 3,000 visitors a year. The variety and number of fish were amazing. There were lots of conchs, lobsters, spawning fish and moray eels. Sadly, due to rising sea temperatures, most of the corals were dead, but that is a problem everywhere in the Caribbean.

Everyone we met in Cuba seemed glad to see us. Cubans are a very proud and resourceful people. The life expectancy in Cuba is comparable to life expectancy in the United States. We saw some poverty, but no more than we see in Denver on a typical day. I did not see any homeless

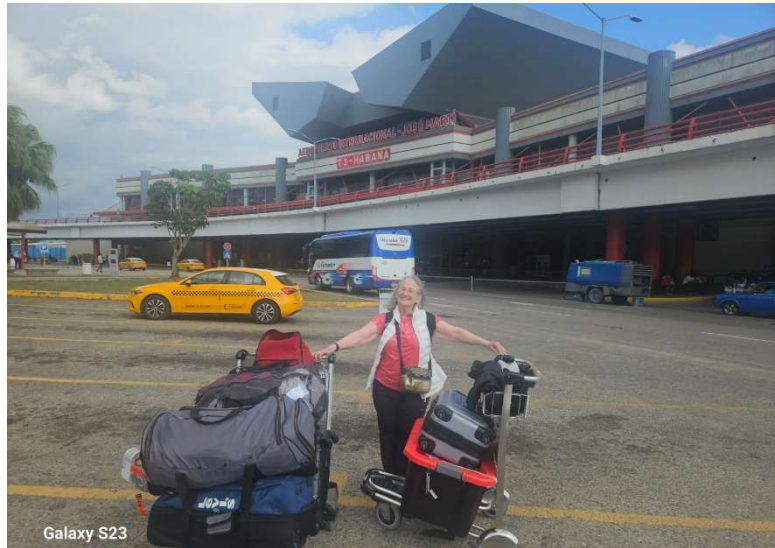
campsites.

We saw an amazing array of older cars and convertibles on the roads. We were picked up at the airport in a 1954 Chevy sedan. The car had a Cadillac engine for many years, but now it has a Mercedes diesel engine. Our driver said that Cuba does not have mechanics so now they have magicians to maintain their cars!

In preparation for our trip, Gerry and I watched several movies set in Cuba. *The Buena Vista Social Club* is a 1999 documentary film about traditional Cuban music. The music was so inspiring that our friend **Nicky Kenney** (a music lover) went to a music store and purchased strings for guitars, violins, violas and string bass. Due to the embargo, these are simply not available to Cuban students. We were able to donate them to a music school.

Preparing for the trip to Cuba, we had several long discussions about what to bring. The trip organizers suggested that at the end of the trip, we leave unwanted clothing, snorkeling gear and toiletries. A friend of ours suggested powdered milk and canned tuna fish. This piqued my interest, so I began to read about the political and economic state of Cuba. I searched the internet for lists of things to bring. The need was astounding. Gerry and I went through our bathroom and kitchen cupboards. Here are some of the things we packed:

- Band aids and bandages
- Body, face, and hand creams
- Chocolate
- Clothing
- Feminine supplies
- Hairbrushes and ties
- Hand soap
- Kitchen supplies, sponges, brushes
- OTC pain relievers and Mucinex
- Rice and barley
- Shoes and sandals
- Toiletries
- Tools
- Toothbrushes and dental supplies



Arriving in Havana with medical supplies

On Wednesday, March 5, we flew to Havana on United Airlines with a plane change in Houston. Gerry and I met the other members of our group at an evening mojito reception. One person in the group (**Diana Mason**) had come to Havana four days earlier to learn about healthcare in Cuba. Diana teaches nursing in Washington DC, and she visited health facilities and met with medical professionals in Havana. I asked Diana where we should donate our supplies, and she suggested the clinic that she had visited earlier on Wednesday.

Diana came to our hotel room to help me choose the items that she thought the clinic could use. She took **everything** I had set out. Diana said that the need is incredible because of the economy and embargo in Cuba. Our group schedule was very busy, so we did not have time to visit the clinic in person. Instead, our local guide delivered three suitcases to the clinic on Friday and sent us pictures. One suitcase was from **Not Just Tourists**, while a second suitcase was full of medical supplies gathered by Gerry's sister (**Barbara Forney**), a retired veterinarian. The third suitcase contained the assorted items from our basement and kitchen.

We spent three days in Havana on a very structured tour. On Thursday, we walked through the Old City, marveled at the restored convertibles, saw the monuments, major squares, visited art galleries and ate at several fabulous restaurants. We got a chance to try the traditional shredded beef dish ("*ropa vieja*") and many wonderfully different mojitos. Thursday evening, we went to a nightclub to hear a group. We enjoyed the first set, but by 11 PM, we called it a night! Cuba is known for music. Small groups of men played music on the street or outside tourist restaurants. Some of the older men seemed to be playing for their own enjoyment rather than hustling. Their music was soul-felt and beautiful. We learned that the national song (Guantanamera) is a song about the lost love of a woman from Guantánamo.



Art, Art, Art

We visited Muraleando, a former dumpsite that was reclaimed by neighborhood residents. They excavated a huge trash heap and created art from the found items. This community art project now has workshops, a kiln, and an entertainment center where we were entertained with live music and salsa lessons. We had a fun afternoon full of music, art, and fellowship.

On Friday, we went to Las Terrazas, a planned community about 45 miles southwest of Havana. More than a thousand people live in Las Terrazas, and it has art galleries, a clinic, daycare, restaurants and schools. The community was originally a coffee plantation with slave quarters. Coffee growing depleted and eroded the soil. The land was terraced (hence the name) as part of a reforestation program initiated by Castro in 1968.

The eroded land was terraced to create fields for planting, tree plantations to control erosion, and creeks were dammed for swimming and boating. Las Terrazas is a bird watcher's paradise with more than 100 species reported. In 1984, UNESCO declared the area a Biosphere Reserve. We visited two workshops and several shops that sold coffee, handmade goods, honey, and wooden souvenirs.

Muraleando Community Art



Coffee Grinder at Las Terrazas



View of Las Terrazas

We woke up early Saturday morning for a 275-mile drive across the middle part of Cuba to the port of Jucaro. We spent the next week on a liveaboard dive boat, snorkeling four times a day. Here is a link to our snorkel tour:

<https://www.oceanicsociety.org/expedition/cuba-snorkeling-gardens-of-the-queen/>

Our trip was just a small taste of Cuba, and it certainly beckons me back. It is important to remember, travel is about people, not politics!

Yours in friendship! Irene Ludwig, President FF Denver

MUNCH LUNCH BUNCH APRIL 2025

Sack Lunch Outing and Save Our Luncheons!!



A Munch Lunch Bunch bring-your-own sack luncheon returns at **11:30 AM on Saturday, April 12** (water, tap or sparkling, will be available!).

Luree Miller will host at her condo – 2001 Lincoln Street #1221 – at Lincoln and 20th Street (downtown Denver and about 3 blocks from the Brown Palace Hotel).

Curbside metered parking and nearby parking lot available, as is a light rail stop at 20th/Welton Street.



To RSVP or ask any questions, please email **Luree Miller** at lureemiller@mac.com. The condo concierge will have your names and allow you up the elevator to her floor, so don't forget to RSVP!

And what does Save Our Luncheon mean? After April 30th, Luree will be resigning from her post as MLB coordinator. After 10 years in this role, she says it is breaktime.

That means we need someone else to step forward to oversee MLB outings. Luree promises this is a fun, sweat-free job, and she will help mentor whoever takes over the role.

But if no one does, what happens to the Munch Lunch Bunch? The whole bunch will go into hibernation or, worse, cease to exist. Remember that it takes a village to keep everything running smoothly. So please let one of the board members or Luree know about your willingness to volunteer for this fun-fun-fun job!!!

NANCY WOOD, FIELD REPRESENTATIVE ROCKY MOUNTAIN REGION

My name is Nancy Wood, and I am the new Rocky Mountain Region Field Rep replacing Sue Palmer. Over the coming year I look forward to getting to know you and your clubs and hopefully visiting as many of you as is possible.

A little about me. I joined Friendship Force of Western Colorado in August of 2021. I was elected to the FFWC board in 2022 getting my feet wet as a member at large. I was mentored as a Journey Coordinator and co-coordinated two inbound journeys and one outbound journey. In 2023, I was elected club president and served until I moved to South Carolina in May 2023. In 2024, I served on the board of the Western North Carolina club and co-coordinated an inbound journey.



So, where do I live now? Five weeks ago, I moved across the country again. Now I live in Cedar City, Utah. I bought a house with my daughter and son-in-law. We are actively renovating it. I also have a son, daughter-in-law, and two grand kids who live in Madison, Wisconsin.

Michigan is where I was born, went to college, married, and raised my family. For thirty years I had a career with Herman Miller (now called MillerKnoll), an office furniture manufacturer in Michigan. My team at work was responsible for paying monthly sales commissions to 350 salespeople located all over the world. Much of my job focused on process improvement, organizing "all the things" and being intentional. These are all skills I hope to bring to my new position with FFI.

Over the last two years as a solo adventurer, I've enjoyed traveling with several of you (and members of your club). I've participated in ten journeys with clubs located in the US, Canada, Costa Rica and Romania. I'm still a newbie when it comes to FFI and have much to learn. But know I'm "all in". I look forward to keeping you informed and working with you on whatever issues or challenges come your way

Here is a current list of Rocky Mountain Region club leaders and their club websites:

Cheyenne: John Kaiser -

Greater Denver: Irene Ludwig - <https://friendshipforcedenver.wildapricot.org/>

New Mexico: Carolyn Rigiroszi - <https://www.ffnewmexico.org/about-ffnm/>

Northern Colorado: Suzi Gossard - <https://ffncolo.com/>

Pikes Peak: Holt Smith - <http://friendshipforcepikespeak.com/>

Utah: Judy Cohen - <https://www.friendshipforceofutah.org/>

Western Colorado: Beverly Spevere and Donna Wallace - <https://www.facebook.com/FriendshipForceWC/>

Here is a job description for FFI Regional Representatives:

"Each region in the United States has a designated representative who is a member of a club within the region and serves on an ad hoc advisory board to FFI to encourage communication to and from the region and Friendship Force International."

CONNECTION MATTERS MORE THAN EVER

IN UNCERTAIN TIMES, CONNECTION MATTERS MORE THAN EVER AVOIDING A COUNTRY MAKES A STATEMENT VISITING A COUNTRY MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Here is a statement released by Friendship Force International on March 4, 2025:

It took vision beyond politics and propaganda to bring diverse nations together. Fueled by the hope that sharing everyday life could knit hearts and minds beyond the barriers that separated them, Friendship Force members have traveled the world—even in the most challenging times—to foster understanding and friendship.



friendship force
INTERNATIONAL

Today as we face another period of global tension, we understand that some members might question whether to travel to some places, including the U.S. However, we encourage you to consider the deeper impact of personal connection in challenging times. Throughout history, Friendship Force has thrived not despite division, but because of it. When political landscapes shift, it is precisely our mission—to promote global understanding across the barriers that separate people—that becomes even more vital.

"You are standing for the idea that the decisions of governments do not define the character of the people they govern".

Boycotting travel may feel like a statement, but it ultimately limits the opportunity for true connection and understanding. When we choose to travel, especially to places where tensions are high, we affirm our belief that people matter more than politics.

I urge you to go. And if you choose to, you are not just visiting a place—you are standing for the idea that the decisions of governments do not define the character of the people they govern. You are leading with empathy, curiosity, and courage, showing the world that bridges are stronger than walls.

Whatever decision you make, we encourage thoughtful reflection on the power of personal diplomacy. At Friendship Force, we remain committed to our mission and our vision.

Please—be the change the world needs. Be the light and go.

Signed,

<https://friendshipforce.org/>



VISITING THE GRANDPARENTS' HOUSE IN HAVANA

Editor's Note: Diana Mason teaches nursing at George Washington University. She helped us donate medical supplies and household goods to a day center for elderly people in Havana. We asked her to write about the Center, since we were unable to visit it. Here is what she had to say:

Outside of yet another paint-chipped, run-down building in Old Havana, Cuba, a tall, slim handsome man in a starched white lab coat greeted me and my guide, **Cicely Aquino**. The building housed the **Casa de Abuelos** or "Grandparents' House," a rehabilitation center. The gentleman greeting us was **Dr. Orestes Quesada**, the center's medical director.



Sandra Hechaverria and Diana Mason

As a public health nurse with a focus on health policy, I had requested a visit to a health center as I was planning a trip to Cuba. I had known for decades about Cuba's health care system that prioritized primary care and community-based services with a focus on wellness and health promotion. High-tech acute care was simply not an option for the country whose economy has struggled since the revolution in 1959. As a result, Cuba developed a free health care system that became renowned as a model for other countries.

As we walked inside, it was clear that the center took a holistic view of health. As Dr. Quesada noted several times, the health team addresses the physical, mental, emotional, and social dimensions of health for 40 patients, most of whom are "elders". Besides receiving physical and occupational therapy, many of the patients spend much of their day at the center. As we entered the building, there were people deep in conversation or playing dominos or engaged in other activities. Wafting aromas throughout the Center suggested a tasty lunch that had been served to patients and staff.

Dr. Quesada introduced me to the "queen" of the Center, a somewhat frail-looking woman who was in her late 90s, as well as some other patients, all of whom lived in the local neighborhood. The staff know the people who live in the community and sometimes make home visits, as needed by patients.

The health care team also includes a nurse who is the center director, Dr. Quesada, a physical therapist, an occupational therapist, a psychologist, a social worker, a nutritionist, and an ophthalmologist. At times, these clinicians may see patients outside of Casa de Abuelos.

The run-down condition of the interior of the building belied the lively buzz that prevailed, including in interactions with the staff. But I was struck by the bare rooms with old-style steel exam tables and other equipment that likely originated in the 1950s. The physical therapist and Dr. Orestes were pleased to show me a new piece of equipment the Center had received as a donation from another country that would allow better assessment and interventions for rehabilitation.



Centro Geriatrico Dr Santiago Ramon Cajal



Optometric exam at Centro Geriatrico

I asked Dr. Orestes, "What about your work here keeps you up at night or otherwise is most concerning?" He did not hesitate to answer: "Resources." This was apparent to me as I toured the Center, but he noted that they often lacked basic medications and supplies. I was glad that I had brought some bandages and medications with me to donate to the center, including an unopened bottle of an eye medication that is used pre- and post-cataract surgery. He was delighted, noting that he had a patient who was having cataract surgery the next week and the medication would help a great deal with the patient's recovery.

The Center's director is nurse **Sandra Hechavarria Negrin**. After being the chief nurse for all of Havana, she sought a less stressful job, and she has been the Center's director for 12 years. I asked her the same question that I asked Dr. Quesada. The answer was the same. During our conversation, her phone rang and, after answering it, she told me that the call was an example of the challenges she faced every day. It was confirming that the Center was getting rice that they had requested after running out of it for the patients' lunches.

Research has documented that primary care and community-based care saves lives and money. Despite its poverty, Cuba has a health care system that is more effective on some indicators than the United States. For example, life expectancy in Cuba in 2022 was 78.16 years, while the U.S. life expectancy was 78.4 years. Even infant mortality is comparable: 6.2 deaths per 1,000 live births in Cuba versus 5.61 deaths per 1,000 live births in the United States. But that same year, the United States spent an average of \$13,400 per person on health care, while Cuba's per person health spending was \$983.



Centro Geriatrico Dr Santiago Ramón Cajal

There are lessons to be learned from Cuba about promoting health and controlling health care spending. While I don't want their poverty, I covet a health care system that focuses on keeping people healthy. May our countries find ways to build bridges and share the lessons we each have learned.

Dr. Diana J. Mason, PhD, RN, Fellow of the American Academy of Nursing

The pictures of patients at the Center came from the world wide web because of privacy concerns. Here is more information about the Center:

<https://www.tribuna.cu/habana-500/2019-07-18/en-fotos-el-renacer-de-la-habana-vieja>

<https://islalsur.wordpress.com/2015/11/25/centro-geriatrico-salud-vida-y-amor/>

https://www.academia.edu/115690093/Rehabilitaci%C3%B3n_Integral_Al_Adulto_Mayor_Cl%C3%ADnica_vs_Ecnolog%C3%ADa

FRIENDSHIP FORCE JOURNEY SPECIAL ASSESSMENT



friendship force
INTERNATIONAL

Here is a memo that we received from FFI on March 19, 2025:

Important Update: Special Assessment for 2025 Journeys

Friendship Force Leaders,

We appreciate your dedication to Friendship Force and all that you do to create meaningful connections through our journeys. As we navigate rising operational costs and work to ensure a sustainable future for our organization, we must share an important update regarding our 2025 budget.

We have carefully reviewed our budget to find ways to sustain our programs in the face of rising costs without compromising the quality of your experiences. After exploring various options, it became clear that a small temporary adjustment is necessary to help keep Friendship Force financially stable.

To address this challenge and help close the budget deficit, the FFI Board of Directors has approved **a special assessment of \$15 USD per ambassador** for all journeys taking place **from May 1st through the end of the year**.

This decision was not made lightly, but it is essential to ensure that Friendship Force remains financially sustainable and can continue its vital mission of breaking down barriers and fostering global understanding.

We understand that this may create additional work for our dedicated Journey Coordinators, and we are truly grateful for your support in communicating this change to your journeys' ambassadors. Your efforts are essential to keeping our journeys running smoothly and maintaining the spirit of friendship and connection that defines our organization.

If you have any questions or need guidance on implementing this update, please do not hesitate to reach out. Questions or concerns can be emailed to finance@friendshipforce.org.

Thank you for your understanding and continued support. Together, we will ensure that Friendship Force remains strong and continues to make a positive impact around the world.

Finance Department Friendship Force International

This is not an additional \$15 per night. This is a one-time fee per Journey and per Ambassador. For example, if an Ambassador is participating in a 6-night Journey, they will pay the FFI fee of $\$25 \times 6 = \150 plus the \$15 mission support fee for a total of \$165.

*If a Journey has two or more phases, the \$15 is only paid once - not for each phase of the same Journey.

If you or your ambassadors have already submitted FFI fee payments for your Journey, you can still submit a one-time payment of \$15 USD. The easiest way to make payments to FFI is online. If you pay via eCheck, there are no processing fees. If you prefer, you can also mail a physical check.

<https://helpcenter.friendshipforce.org/help/how-do-i-pay-for-my-journey/>

CALENDAR 2025



BOARD MEETING via Zoom **APR 1**
Tuesday, 1:00 – 2:00 pm

APRIL 2025 MEETING **APR 8**
Tuesday, 6:30 – 8:30 pm
Program: "Take A Suitcase and Save a Life" by Kathy Reager

JOURNEY TO JAPAN **APR 20-30**
Sapporo: April 20-27
Niigata: April 27-30
Excursion: May 1-7

BOARD MEETING via Zoom **MAY 13**
Tuesday, 1:00 – 2:00 pm
Rescheduled from **MAY 6**

MAY 2025 MEETING **MAY 13**
Tuesday, 6:30 – 8:30 pm
Program: "Social Event"

BOARD MEETING via Zoom **JUNE 3**
Tuesday, 1:00 – 2:00 pm

JUNE 2025 MEETING **JUNE 10**
Tuesday, 6:30 – 8:30 pm
Program: "Visiting Japan"

JULY 2025: NO MEETING
AUGUST 2025: NO MEETING

INBOUND EXCHANGE **AUGUST 6-11**
CENTRAL NORTH CAROLINA

ANNUAL PICNIC **AUGUST 10**

THANK YOU, CLUB VOLUNTEERS!

FINANCIAL REVIEW

The Financial Review Committee is "Appointed by the President to assure that the financial books of the Club have been kept in an appropriate manner. Review records of the Treasurer as soon as possible after December 31 each year and send a report to the President."

Jack Green and **Pam Comello** met with our club treasurer (**Les Eckstat**) on **March 3** to review the bank statements and financial reports for the year ending December 31, 2025.

Here is their report: "All records reviewed were in excellent order with copies of receipts for expenses and all accounts balanced as expected."

MARCH MEETING

A dozen members of our club attended our monthly meeting on **March 11**.

Ilene Americus taught club members how to use the Friendship Force Denver website:

<https://friendshipforcedenver.wildapricot.org/>

Ilene also demonstrated the FFI public website:

<https://friendshipforce.org/>

FFI also has a member only website:

https://my.friendshipforce.org/en/users/sign_in

JAPAN CULTURAL WORKSHOP

On **March 13**, **Les Eckstat** presented a "Cultural Workshop" for the members of our club who are going to Japan. The presentation was on Zoom.

Les was the Journey Coordinator for our 2016 Exchange to Shizuoka and Sendai. Les has been to Japan four times, so he was able to speak knowledgeably about what to do (and not do) in Japan. Here is a link to the 2025 presentation:

<https://friendshipforcedenver.wildapricot.org/Japan-Outbound-October-2016/>