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Suffolk Law students making well-timed visit to Cuba

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By **Matt Rocheleau**

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JANUARY 17, 2015

As the United States and Cuba move to normalize relations, a group of Suffolk University Law students is exploring firsthand what those historic ties might look like.

The two dozen students are in the island nation participating in an 11-day, first-of-its-kind course on negotiation and mediation at the University of Havana Law School. The visit, planned months ago, is taking on special meaning just three weeks after the two governments announced they were restoring diplomatic relations for the first time since 1961.

The United States-Cuba agreement reached last month was “a perfect symbol of mediation and negotiation,” retired judge Isaac Borenstein, a visiting professor at Suffolk Law and a trip coordinator, said by phone from Cuba.



“People thought they would never see it in their lifetime,” he added. “Everybody is hopeful there will be more American investment and more Americans traveling here, and people coming here are going to wonder how does the legal system work.”

On Thursday, President Obama said the United States will ease some restrictions on travel to Cuba.

The course on negotiation and mediation is being taught by professors from the Havana and Suffolk law schools and by teachers from the Mediation Group, a nonprofit in Brookline.

The Suffolk delegation is taking a personal approach. Instead of staying in a hotel and traveling around on a chartered tour bus, the students are staying in private homes with Cuban families and traveling by taxi and on foot.

“It’s always been my personal bias that when I’m traveling anywhere in the world that I’d rather stay in a home and travel around like the people who live there do,” Borenstein said. “It’s an unbelievable experience, and the kids love it.”

Borenstein was born in Cuba and lived there until a few months before he turned 11 years old. He has visited the country nearly a dozen times since he moved away, and he is now serving as the students’ guide.

“I love being here,” he said. “I feel like I’m home.”

The course had been planned for months and was an education exchange legally permitted before the latest developments between the two countries .

Discussions for the exchange began this past March when Suffolk Law dean Camille A. Nelson visited the Havana law school, becoming the first American law school dean to do so since the Cuban Revolution, Borenstein said. On that trip, Nelson, Borenstein, and associate dean Ilene Seidman participated in a two-day academic exchange.

In the fall, Havana law school professor Leonardo Perez Gallardo visited Suffolk to speak to faculty and students about the history of the Cuban legal system.

When Suffolk announced the travel opportunity to its students, about 90 applied for a dozen spots, prompting the law school to double the number of openings, Borenstein said.

And the trip coinciding with last month's historic announcement is inspiring, he said.

"The timing couldn't have been better to do this," Borenstein said.

Matt Rocheleau can be reached at matthew.rocheleau@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter [@mrochele](https://twitter.com/mrochele).



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