Photos Capture everyday life in Cuba

- Former students Raul Menjivar, the man behind the camera lens, shares a different side of the country through a photo exhibit now on campus.

By Prescella Sanchez
Staff Writer

Last summer Raul Menjivar was among the five students who journeyed to Cuba with sociology Professor Jose Prado. He was there as part of the student panel and to document the group’s academic experience.

Menjivar also wanted to capture the essence of Cuba. His 47 photos are now on display at the University Library.

“I wanted to focus on the everyday Cubano and the children,” said Menjivar, who graduated from California State University Dominguez Hills last spring and is now working on his master’s at California State L.A. “From my research there were many, many photos of Cuba during the revolution, social movements and journalist style, but none of kids and the people.”

Menjivar says he enjoys photographing Latin cultural subjects. Professor Prado was looking to document the group’s time in Cuba so Menjivar saw the chance to capture a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and volunteered his skills.

“I photograph as a hobby and we agreed that I would photograph the academic part of the trip and when I had time I was able to branch out on my own,” said Menjivar.

A few days into the student seminars at Las Casas de las Americas, Menjivar noticed that the woman in charge of making the coffee for the students, Elvia Bentacourt, was watching him photograph his peers. Bentacourt approached and insisted he visit her apartment to photograph what she called “the best view of La Habana.”

Menjivar agreed and accompanied her home on her lunch break.

“She opened her French windows and she had the entire view of all La Habana from the 18th floor,” said Menjivar. “I told her she had the most amazing view and people pay a lot of money for a like this in the United States.”

After clicking away, it didn’t take long for Menjivar to notice Bentacourt’s grandson, Antuan Bentacourt, sitting on a rocking chair watching a baseball game. Antuan was curious and began to play with the camera. He became Menjivar’s next subject.

“Antuan was nervous, uncomfortable, kept putting his hand in his mouth,” said Menjivar. “I didn’t like the lighting so I repositioned him and told him to look into the camera and he did great.”

This photo of Antuan was selected to be the poster representing the photography exhibit of Cuba at Dominguez Hills. Menjivar submitted three of his photos to the photography department at Santa Monica Community College, where he took photography classes for fun.

“The judges consist of professors who have worked with National Geographic, Discovery and other big-name magazines,” said Menjivar.

Of more than 1,600 submissions, 274 were selected for a student exhibit at the college, including all three of Menjivar’s photos. The photos will be displayed at a student photo exhibit through May 3 at Santa Monica Community College.

“I am greatly humbled by this trip,” said Menjivar. “To see my experience in Cuba go from that to two photo exhibits, it’s a great feeling.”

The Photo Exhibit of Cuba is on display through May 18 in room 1940 of the University Library South Wing lower level. Admission is free and the exhibit is open to the public. For gallery hours, call (310) 243-2127.