

Kyudo Nippon Magazine

Kyudo in Cuba Article

by Chelsey Velilla

On a warm morning in mid-December, with the bright Caribbean sun shining down into the narrow, stone-lined streets of Havana's historic district, three individuals dressed in kimono and hakama, carrying yumi and ya, made their way to the House of Asia Museum on Mercaderes Street. They did not go unnoticed by the crowds of locals and tourists that they passed who, stirred with curiosity, smiled and snapped photos of this exotic looking trio. They were Belén Pérez, professor at the University of Zaragoza, Spain and author of the book "*The Essence of Kyudo*" and Sabastian and Chelsey Velilla, kyudoka and founders of Florida Budokan, the only kyudojo in the state of Florida. With the support of the Honorable Kenji Hirata, Ambassador to Japan in Cuba, the Cuban Archery Federation and the Ministry of Sports and Recreation, the three visitors were in Havana to present the art of Kyudo to the people of Cuba for the first time in the country's history.

Inside the House of Asia, a group of eager faces filled the seats of a long exhibit hall crowned with an ornate, beam-construction ceiling, just one of the many in the colonial-era building that houses art and antiquities from across the Asian continent. Most fittingly, the current exhibit in this room was a large collection of Japanese woodblock prints, the perfect backdrop for an introduction to the art of Kyudo. Pérez Sensei gave a lecture with corresponding Power Point presentation that provided the basic fundamentals of Kyudo including the eight steps of the Hassetsu, the principles of Shin Zen Bi, and an overview of equipment and training spaces needed for the practice. After the presentation, Pérez and the Velillas performed a three-person, hitotsumato sharei using a makiwara so that the audience could better see the principles of shooting and the hassetsu in action. A spirited question-and-answer session followed with many individuals voicing their desires to learn more about the art and wondering how that might become a possibility for them in the future.

The following day, a similar event was presented at the University of Science and Sports to a sizable crowd of interested individuals, several who stated that they had walked or bicycled hours just to be there. There were many faces present who had attended the event the previous day at the House of Asia and were so inspired that they wanted to see the presentation again. The Honorable Ambassador Hirata was in attendance on this day and participated actively in the question-and-answer period, sharing his thoughts with the other audience members and staying afterwards for pictures with the attendees.

On the third day, the Velillas and Pérez visited Chotoku Dojo in Reparto Celimar, outside of the busy downtown area of Havana, run by Sensei Ernesto Guzmán. The dojo is located in a rural area and is made up of a large outdoor pavilion with a concrete floor. Several dojo students were already onsite sweeping leaves and debris off the floor with makeshift brooms made from fallen palm fronds and small tree branches. Slowly, a large crowd began to gather made up of Chotoku Dojo students and their families, visiting students from other dojos, interested community members, and the Honorable Ambassador Hirata. This day's presentation was a more informal one, beginning with the hitotsumato sharei followed by a step-by-step demonstration of the hassetsu. For about 45 minutes, Sabastian and Belén answered many pertinent questions from the audience before inviting interested individuals to try out the eight steps of shooting

using gomi yumi donated by Velilla Sensei. The age range of student attendees was 6 years old to 88 years old and all were interested in giving Kyudo a try.

“My overall impression of this trip” says Sabastian, “is that the people of Cuba have such genuine warmth and generosity. I was overwhelmed by the sense of hospitality that we experienced in each place we visited. The people are eager and willing to learn new art forms and many of them expressed how excited they are at the prospect of learning Kyudo as a means to enhance their physical, mental and even spiritual well-being. It is no secret that the country faces many obstacles and hardships, but the people are sincere and long to maintain positivity and keep moving forward with hope.”

Sports culture has a strong tradition in Cuba, with baseball and soccer being among the most popular, and many of the Budo arts are well represented with Aikido, Karate, and Judo dojos located throughout the country. Kyudo, however, is currently non-existent. The University of Science and Sports has invited the Velillas and Pérez to return during the summer of 2023 during their 50th anniversary celebration to begin teaching an accredited Kyudo course to its students and this should be the first of many positive steps forward. It is the sincerest hope of both the Velillas and Pérez that Kyudo programs may be implemented throughout the country and that the art can begin to spread throughout the larger Caribbean region.