

From the Rome News-Tribune
Staff Writer - Spencer Lahr

When one of the founders of the Cuban youth group Barrio Habana stood before Pepperell middle schoolers Monday morning, he bade it clear he wasn't going to let the barriers of language prevent him from what he needed to say.

"My English is not the best, but I like to talk," said Pavel Garcia Valdes, who visited the school with his wife, Sandra Sotolongo Iglesias, and their two kids Sofia, 5 and Fabio, 6.

Pepperell Middle School teacher Christy Davis met the family during a trip to Cuba in the summer of 2016, when she visited the country as part of the Rural Teacher Global Fellowship. From that initial meeting, Davis found a way to help support the group, which focuses on the redevelopment of the Old Havana neighborhood and overall community building, specifically by providing activities for the youth. Davis was told by Garcia Valdes that the group wanted Legos, which are extremely difficult to get in Cuba because of restrictions from the embargo between country and the U.S.

So, last year, Davis' students raised \$1,200 to purchase new Legos for them and sent them over incrementally. Also, as a school, 50 pounds in Legos were donated from students.

Now seventh graders, Davis' former students got a chance to get of class and come meet the family, as well as hearing more about what the group does. And, of course, they got to see pictures of Cuban children building with the Legos.

Garcia Valdes said the groups acts on the belief that the best way to learn is through enjoyment, and with the Legos, it was able to further promote thinking and learning.

Davis said the meeting was completely spontaneous, as the visit just happened to become a possibility with the family coming to the U.S. for a chess camp in New York City for the son - they were able to get a five-year visa.

Garcia Valdes told the students how the relationship built between them and the group is reflective of the bettering of relations between countries. He talked over what the group does in promoting stronger neighborhood, including connecting kids and seniors - three to four generations of a family can stay in one home - through art and interaction.

The group connects the neighborhood through soccer and chess tournaments, and the participation in community improvement projects like painting murals and cleaning up dilapidated structures in the neighborhood.

The family encouraged the students to come visit Cuba as gifts were shared between them. Garcia Valdes said he hoped the students learned something beyond the news reports about his country. "Knowledge is your most powerful tool," he said.