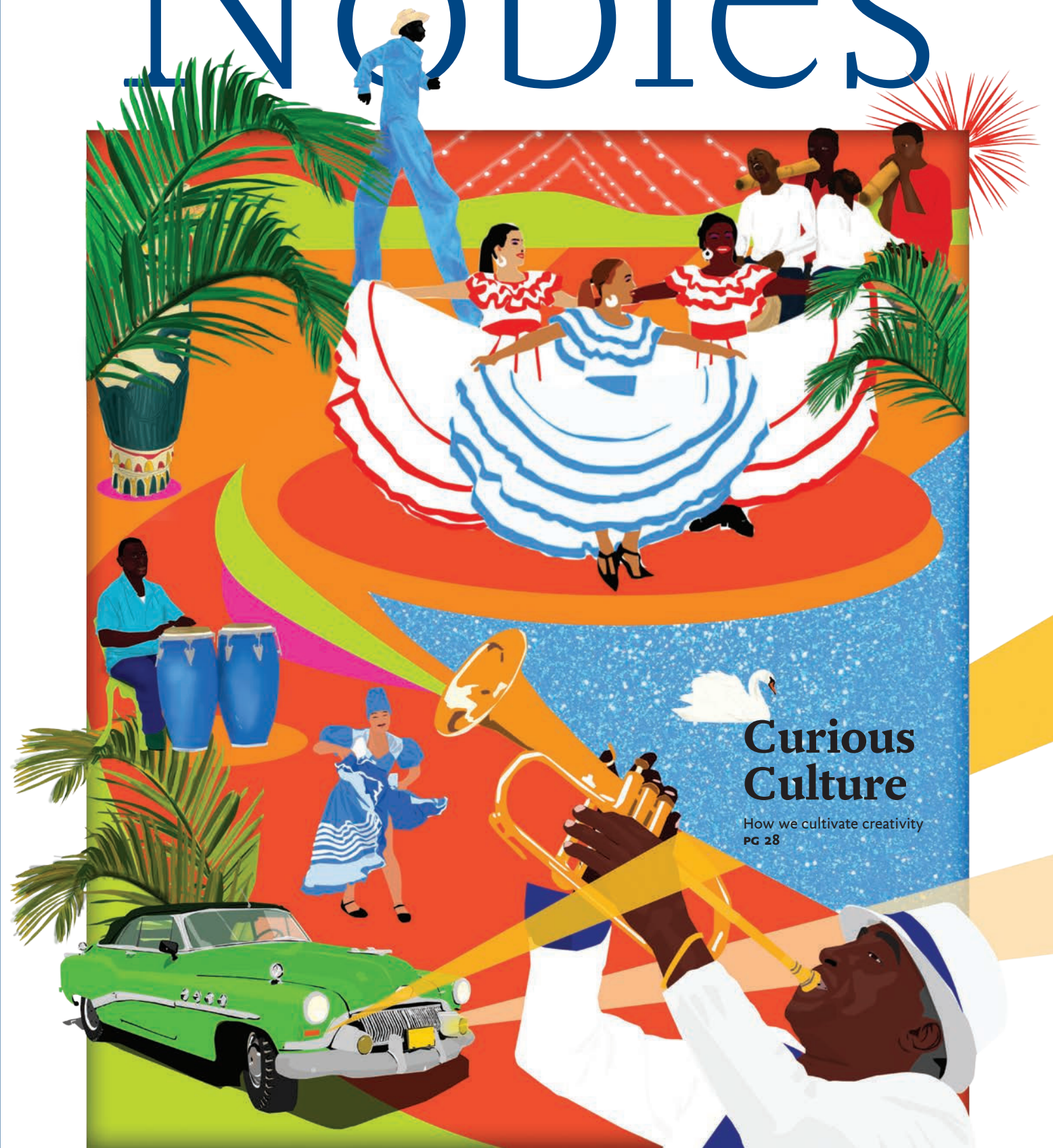


# Nobles

WINTER 2023  
2021-2022 ANNUAL REPORT



## Curious Culture

How we cultivate creativity  
PG 28









# curious culture

BY PAUL LIEBERMAN, MUSIC FACULTY | ILLUSTRATION BY LYNE LUCIEN

INTRODUCTION, PORTRAITS AND FACULTY PROFILES BY KIM NEAL

Curiosity is contagious at Nobles—the exhilaration of chasing questions that tumble forth like dominoes and end in discovery. Each assembly brings a showcase of rousing songs and inspiring personal stories, followed by intellectual epiphanies in class and finding out something new about friends at lunch in the Castle. Afternoon program is another arena for

shedding complacency, onstage or on the pitch. Graduates and current students praise faculty for their fervor in their specialties, an enthusiasm that is catching.

Likewise, so many educators join the profession to remain perpetual scholars themselves. Every day, learning transpires while tackling thorny topics in the classroom, supporting advisees, or

critically reworking a syllabus. Each year, French teacher Mark Sheeran administers a Nobles program through which 80 to 90 teachers transcend Nobles' walls to become students themselves. Their professional and creative pursuits, within and beyond their disciplines, give them energy and empathy for a deeper connection with students. Here are some of their experiences.



**THEY CALL HIM ELEGUA ORISHA**, the owner of roads, the deity of crossroads, paths, chance and change, and a silent messenger of the One God—whether the Yoruba Olofi or Oludumare or the Christian God. Elegua holds the keys to the past, present and future. And he is a significant figure in Santeria, Candomble, Umbanda and other Orisha faiths brought to the Americas by enslaved Yoruba and often syncretized with Catholicism. I had never heard of him before this summer’s 10-day professional development trip to Cuba to study Afro-Cuban history and music. Still, it seems he might explain a lot.

Since my youth, my greatest musical idols have been African American, and I’ve felt their call my entire life. Contemplating their towering mastery, intellectual brilliance and universally beloved soul power in the same frame as the crushingly racist environment they’ve lived and worked in from their first breath to their last has always inspired me to try to honor them through my work.

Seemingly magically, doorways have swung open at key points along this journey. In those moments, the universe appears to whisper, “Go ahead.” Thus I found myself living as a studio musician in Brazil, on the road through the American South with Jaimoe, the Black Mississippi-born co-founder of the Allman Brothers Band, and studying with a Yoruba Ph.D. ethnomusicologist while in jazz graduate school at UMass Amherst.

My prior experience focused on the relationships between Brazilian and American music. But what I studied with Professor Olabode Omojola zoomed me out to a higher-level view, centering traditional West African culture and its powerful and hidden presence throughout the Americas. As I followed this trail, more and more of what I uncovered cried out, “Cuba! If you want to understand, Cuba is key!” Because while Brazil has the largest number of people of African descent outside of Africa, Cuba has the highest percentage and the most recently arrived of such culture bearers.

I had been on the fence about applying for a Nobles professional development grant for this trip—hungry for downtime after a challenging school year and somewhat intimidated about slogging alone through the Caribbean summer heat in a Communist dictatorship. Even though as a Portuguese speaker I could manage basic communications in Spanish, there was anxiety there, too. But I have learned to give a lot of weight to things that Mark Sheeran, who administers faculty grants, offhandedly says, and I kept hearing his voice telling me, “You really should do it.” I worked with an academic travel company that put together an intensive itinerary custom-tailored to my quirky interests, and I was thrilled to receive the grant. As for my anxiety, life has taught me to view the scary things as bull’s-eyes to head straight for because they are always where one finds the juiciest growth.

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**GEORGE BLAKE** *Classics department head, assistant cross-country coach, advisor*

**OPPORTUNITY** *Classical Association of New England (CANE) Summer Institute at Brown University, Rhode Island, 2015–2019*



“They did a really good job of making connections you might not ordinarily make, like one year when we were reading some ancient stuff, but the professor paired it with a contemporary novel that I wouldn’t have naturally read on my own. Little nuggets of information that you learn from the professor or others in the class can help you see a work like *The Odyssey* in a new way. You can’t help but think, ‘I don’t know if I would teach it this way,’ or ‘Wow, that’s a really cool way of doing it.’ And then you bring some of that back to the classroom.”



“It’s one thing to be an adult student who teaches themselves and learns from peers. It’s another to go back to square one and study two new instruments in a foreign language under advanced professionals.”



I posted about the trip on Facebook, inviting suggestions from musicians, historians and art historians about people, places and things I should try to see while there. A wave of information came back to me. A message from my old boss, Brazilian jazz star Flora Purim, enhanced a growing sense of mystery. “Dear, I know a lot of great musicians and teachers who can take you places that you wouldn’t be able to go by yourself. The locals’ secret

places.” Other musicians chimed in too, and a friend connected me with the brilliant scholar Ned Sublette, who literally wrote the book on Cuban music—*Cuba and Its Music: From the First Drums to the Mambo*. Another of his books, *The World That Made New Orleans: From Spanish Silver to Congo Square*, was already a foundation of my cross-curricular teaching at Nobles. And here I was about to have a 45-minute phone conversation with him!

Alarmingly, when I told him my plans, he led with, “I don’t think it’s a great idea for you to go to Cuba right now.” The combination of weaknesses in their system and the strangling U.S. economic blockade has been an ongoing problem. The pandemic and an energy crisis due to the situations in Russia and Venezuela have only exacerbated things, so times are historically tough there. I was to arrive on the first anniversary of the serious

**ORIS BRYANT** *History and social sciences faculty; advisor; boys varsity basketball coach; FAC (faculty advisory representative); Mock Trial Club advisor*  
**OPPORTUNITY** *Athens Institute for Education and Research, 25th Annual International Conference on Education, Greece; rescheduled from 2020 to 2023*



“In 2020, I was slated to co-present in Greece on the teaching of writing with one colleague who is a UMass Boston professor and another who teaches at the elementary level. With Covid, we’re now rescheduled for May 2023. I know the UMass Boston professor because she’s also the director of the Boston Writing Project; I’m a member of their advisory board and have run workshops on teaching history and writing. It’s actually nerve-racking to think about standing up there talking about research that I’ve done in terms of how I teach, and using my students in the case study. Though it’s a very small sample, because I teach at an independent school, I believe the methodology I use can be applied to other levels: high school, middle school or college. So, I’m excited. Argumentation is one of the best ways to improve students’ critical thinking skills on different levels—when they’re talking and when they’re writing—because they have to make arguments, they have to weigh arguments, they have to evaluate arguments, and they have to defend arguments.”

disturbances that prompted a heavy government crackdown. “And Cubans love anniversaries!” Ned warned. Nobody knew what might go down.

On the other hand, I also reached out to Orlando Maraca Valle, the Paganini of Cuban flute with whom I had worked once before. And he swung open another door by inviting me to record with him (which I did).

I spent six days in Havana, being cared for by the most wonderful hosts. The old cars are the most famous manifestation of Cuba’s curious back-in-time aspect. But in the almost complete absence of the corporate marketing-driven consumer culture and systems that characterize the developed world, a subtler, more beautiful back-in-time part of Cuban life is the primacy of personal relationships. And so those thoughtful, caring hosts have become friends for life.

In the mornings, my guide, Fidel, a brilliant professor of history with an extraordinary breadth and depth of knowledge, taught me about Cuban/Afro-Cuban history, religion, culture and arts. We visited Old Havana and saw churches, forts and other historic sites. But Fidel also wanted to show me aspects of “real life,” so he led me inside some *solares*—aging urban mansions divided into apartments for 10 or so families, who all share one communal sink and one bathroom. He showed me people standing in line for hours in the hot sun to purchase their ration of basics like bread and chicken. We also visited a

famous living museum of Afro-Cuban culture called El Callejon de Hamel (Hamel’s Alley), located in the Cayo Hueso area of downtown Havana, and the Fidel Castro Center, a new museum about his life.

I tell my students that all musicians are students for life. But it’s one thing to be an adult student who teaches himself and learns from peers. It’s another to go back to square one and study two new instruments in a foreign language under advanced professionals. The idea was to study two percussion instruments—congas and timbales—to learn about the complex and elaborate structures of Afro-Cuban music. We had built nine hours of private lessons into my itinerary. My teacher Aisar Hernandez Segundo, a bassist, composer and bandleader, had two of his percus-

sionists, Geosvany (congas) and Victor (timbales), join us in his rooftop terrace studio for all nine hours of lessons.

We began with the *marcha* on the conga—the basic four-beat pattern with two eighth notes on each beat—which serves as part of the rhythmic foundation of the music. Aisar stressed the importance of the mental comprehension of the *marcha* and its elements, and Victor emphasized the importance of hearing the sounds of the different strokes in my head to lead the hands to sing. And they assigned me homework to practice on the tabletop back at my *casa* that night. When I returned for my second lesson, we built on the previous day’s foundation to learn how to play the *marcha* on two congas. I also learned the *cascara* (shell) and *contra-campana* (low

“In addition to everything I learned musically, it was great to be reminded of how it feels to be a student.”



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**HEIDI CHARLES** Archivist; librarian; Nobleman student newspaper co-advisor

**OPPORTUNITY** Journalism Educators Association Advisor’s Institute, New Orleans, Louisiana, summer 2022



“This summer, I attended the JEA Institute, a three-day conference for high school journalism educators and advisors to network and participate in advisor-specific training. The conference was incredibly helpful to me as one of the co-advisors of the *Nobleman*; I participated in exercises designed to put the advisor in the shoes of the student journalist and had great discussions with my peers about the landscape of student journalism and the challenges facing student newspapers today, such as lack of funding, low readership, and mistrust from teachers and administrators. I’m hopeful that I can use the things I learned while at the JEA Institute to empower this year’s *Nobleman* staff to tackle important issues in the community that appeal to our audience while fostering strong relationships and building trust within our community. I also look forward to doing more in the classroom this year in the way of curriculum to help students become active scholastic journalists. I recommend the JEA Institute to any broadcast, journalism or yearbook advisors. It was such a great learning experience and a great opportunity to connect with other educators.”



cowbell) patterns on the timbales. We ended with an extended session of me playing a pattern on timbales while the two percussionists went to town on the congas and bongo. It was like riding a bucking bronco as they did their best to throw me off. Taking turns, they fed off of each other as they swerved around the time in incredible, increasingly complex ways. Even as I felt my head might explode trying to hold it together, it was *so much fun!*

In addition to everything I learned musically, it was great to be reminded of how it feels to be a student. I struggled to comprehend, absorb and execute the new material, working at the limits of my ability. And my team of teachers' warm, supportive, respectful and friendly treatment was so important to my small successes.

The scholar who questioned the timing of my trip also told me, "Matanzas is the most important place. It is the great transmitter of Africa in Cuba." Two hours east of Havana by car, its large bay and proximity to the sugar plantations made it Cuba's primary port for the importation of African slave labor. With the fabulous riches of the Cuban sugar industry, Matanzas became a significant nexus of artistic creativity.

In Matanzas, the San Severino Castle, a historic fort, contains a fascinating collection of replicas of Orishas. Seeing them life-size, vivid in their traditional outfits and colors, and holding their traditional objects was a powerful way to make their acquaintance. It was an eerie moment coming face-to-face for the first time with

the Ibeji Orisha, the twins after whom I had named my CD 12 years previously.

Elegua Orisha, who had first caught my attention in a wood carver's shop in Havana, was also here:

The fort's art gallery was closed to renovate the stairs that led down to it. However, after the museum director observed how I interacted with the Orishas, with the displays of drums used in their worship, and with other items like manacles revealing the brutal treatment of the enslaved Africans, he told Fidel that we *could* go down to the gallery. A guide offered poignant details about the heart-breaking artistic evocations of that same brutality—a powerfully disturbing experience and a fascinating education.

Back in Havana that evening, Dalila, who painstakingly oversaw all aspects of my visit to Cuba, took me to the *Fabrica de Arte Cubano* (Cuban Art Factory). It's an industrial building converted into hip spaces for the presentation of performing and visual arts. We watched an outstanding performance of contemporary, Cubanized versions of pieces by Bartok, Ravel, Gershwin, Piazzolla, Prokofiev and Ligeti, and ended the night at a jazz club by invitation of Maraca. Despite my protests that I hadn't played for a week, he demanded I bring my flute and sit in for a *descarga* (jam). Then he blew me away over mojitos with his world-class, one-of-a-kind flute playing.

The next day, Dalila and Estéban—the warm and philosophical driver who ferried me around Havana in his vintage Russian

**JENNY CARLSON-PIETRASZEK** History faculty; middle school outdoor adventure coach; advisor

**OPPORTUNITY** Five-Day Adventure Basics Training with High 5 Adventure, Vermont, 2022



"I've been doing and coaching outdoor activities for many years now, but with the departure of Nick Nickerson, Nobles' resident outdoorsman, it felt important to up my game with some quality training. Nobles supported me in taking this course, which is similar to one I did 20-plus years ago with Project Adventure, when I started Middle School Outdoor Adventure (MSOA), and it will support me in pursuing the Level II training and certification. Training like this both ensures the safety of the participants in MSOA and allows Nobles to open up its low- and high-ropes course elements for academic classes, athletic teams, clubs, EXCEL groups and more. I'm excited to work toward integrating more experiential learning into our academic school years. MSOA creates a sense of team based on trust, personal challenge, and fun using the great outdoors as our classroom/playground."



Lada sedan—brought me for a personal tour of the Abdala Recording Studio. The largest of the three different studios, Cuba's finest, is big enough to record the Cuban National Symphony. It would be a dream to return one day to record there.

Cuba's second-largest city, Santiago de Cuba, lies in the *Oriente* region on the eastern end of Cuba, across a bay from Haiti and Jamaica. Due to French and African influence brought by refugees from the Haitian Revolution, its music and culture are quite distinct from Havana's. When my flight was canceled, the only option was a 12-hour drive in a private car. My driver, Jose Enrique, also worked as a dance instructor and threw in a complimentary 10-hour seminar in salsa, son, merengue and bolero.

Like Fidel in Havana, my guide, Alex, was a college professor—of art history—and knowledgeable about a comparable breadth and depth of everything cultural and historical in Santiago de Cuba and its connection to the world beyond. We started with a walking tour of the historic center of Santiago de Cuba. As in Havana and Matanzas, Elegua seemed to be at work here too. The first example was bumping into a “Conga,” a street procession occurring because it just happened to be the first day of Santiago's Children's Carnival. The Black joy radiating from the costumed children lovingly accompanied by their parents and dancing amid the oppressive heat and surrounding poverty to the intense percussion music and

*corneta china* (Chinese trumpet) was so powerful it brought me to tears. Stunned, I asked Alex whether he'd planned our itinerary around seeing the Conga, and he replied that no, we had just gotten lucky.

After visiting the Bacardi Museum of Art, we encountered another street performance of a style called Rumba Yambú. As the group played and sang, electrifying solo dancers emerged—first an ensemble member and then an elegant cigar smoker from the small group of onlookers.

That evening we attended a performance at the Casa de la Trova by a local *son* band. Son, a blend of Spanish and African elements, arose in this area in the late 1800s before becoming Cuba's most popular musical style, then flowing out to Europe and the U.S.

The next day began with a combination ceramics studio and social project visit. Its founder, a visionary woman named Xiomara Gutiérrez Valera, whose own work focuses on ecological and women's issues, received us. It invites accomplished artists for residencies, then sells some of their work to help cover costs. These artists also teach young adults, who then go into the schools to teach the younger children. There is also a ceramics group for older women that doubles as a mutual support network.

From there, we went to the Casa del Caribe, dedicated to studying the African diaspora in the Caribbean. Alex had previously glowingly mentioned his mentor, an older professor named Carlos Lloaga

Dominguez, and lo and behold, when we walked out, there he was, sitting on a bench in the garden. We approached, and my jaw dropped as he gave a brief overview of his life's work teaching Cubans about how African their culture is, no matter how white their skin is. I told him that the same work had become a passion of mine in the United States, where that same truth has been more deeply hidden.

He asked when I was leaving Santiago and frowned on hearing that it was the next day. He said there was a person I should meet, thought for a moment, pulled out his phone, and set up an audience for us in a half hour. As we were saying our goodbyes, he asked my name, and when I told him, he looked at me and said, “You are Jewish.” I said yes, and asked if he was. He replied that his grandmother's maiden name was Simon and that although that part had gotten diluted through the generations, he was intrigued by it.

The mystery person he wanted me to meet was Dr. C. Enrique Orozco Rubio, a professor of anthropology, a *Babalaô* (high priest of Santería), and a bandleader whose group won first prize at this year's Havana Festival. The story of his band began with him training drummers to participate in the Santería rituals he leads. He noticed that participants in the rituals would hang out afterward and dance to popular music styles, and he wanted to expand the reach of his ritual musicians into a secular space. Much of our conversation was his description, translated by Alex, of contem-

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**SHEILA MCELWEE** *Science faculty; advisor; faculty co-advisor for Model United Nations*

**OPPORTUNITIES** *Writing course on the comic novel, Harvard Extension School, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2019. Various conferences on learning differences. Pursuing master's degree in chemistry, Illinois State University*



“When I started writing more college recommendations, I wanted to finesse my writing skills, so I decided to do something completely outside of my comfort zone. I took a Harvard Extension School course on the comic novel, specifically because the seniors were going to be reading *On Beauty*, by Zadie Smith. That year, for Nobles' summer reading, I ended up leading a group discussion for *On Beauty*. Nobles students write a lot, and they talk about their writing, and they often stress about it. I wanted to share my students' experiences in disciplines that are very different from what I teach—I have loved talking with them about it. I've also been taking courses to get a master's in chemistry education, to add to my master's in education. It has put me in touch with chemistry teachers all over the country. I've also done a lot of conferences on learning differences, which have been very practical. But what I love about the Nobles professional development program is its willingness to have teachers take a course of deep interest to them, to just grow intellectually.”



“Despite my protests that I hadn’t played for a week, he demanded I bring my flute and sit in for a *descarga*. Then he blew me away over mojitos with his world-class, one-of-a-kind flute playing.”

porary scholarly debate regarding Yoruba history in Africa and the New World. He described how the Anglican desire to “save” their souls brought about the imposition of distorted ethnocentric perspectives onto the Yoruba. He also spoke of the racism of the Yoruba toward whites, whose skin they saw as a sign of unworthiness of being blessed to receive the sun. Pretty heady stuff for a double-ricochet chance encounter!

My final meeting of the day was with percussionist, bandleader and teacher Giraldo Garrido. He used the congas, bongo, guiro and timbales to walk me through the history of Cuban music, including *contradanza*, *danzon*, *son*, *bolero*,

*cha cha*, *timba*, Mozambique and *songa*, as well as the relationships between Cuban music and Brazilian samba, American jazz and Afro-Latin jazz.

Before leaving, I had wanted to visit the Cathedral of the patron saint of Cuba, the Virgin of Charity of Copper, that Fidel had told me about. It turned out that Miguel, our driver the previous day, had spent four years working in Brazil and spoke fluent Portuguese, so Alex arranged for him to pick me up for the half-hour drive to the Cathedral. A community band with woodwinds, brass, strings and percussion was performing as we drove past a central square on our way out of town. I quickly asked Miguel if we could pull over

for a moment for me to hear what they were playing—a *danzon*, Cuba’s national musical style. I later learned the piece was Rubalcava’s “El Cadete Constitucional,” published in 1951. And within seconds of my walking up came the part where 70 years previously, the composer had woven in the “three cheers for the red, white and blue” section of John Philip Sousa’s “Stars and Stripes Forever.” I could almost see Elegua winking and smiling.

Flying back to Havana that night and to the U.S. the next day, I was deeply touched by the spirit and hospitality of the Cuban people. Despite their suffering, they received me warmly with generous and creative hospitality.

**CASSANDRA VELÁZQUEZ** Senior associate director of admission; director of outreach; advisor; JV volleyball assistant coach

**OPPORTUNITY** People of Color Conference (POCC), various U.S. cities, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2010, 2011, 2013, 2014, 2016, 2019, 2021. Annual gathering for U.S. educators of color, in conjunction with SDLC (Student Diversity Leadership Conference), to which Nobles also sends student representatives



“At POCC, we compare curriculum and pick up ideas from other schools to bring back to our community and best support our BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, people of color] students—like celebrating Black pride, or learning about new books on race, class and justice. One year, I was able to do a master class with author Joy DeGruy about post-traumatic slave syndrome, which made me realize how much I don’t know and gave me a completely different lens through which to look at culture. Hearing inspiring speakers together and then sharing our thoughts over a meal just creates a very deep and meaningful connection. It has also given me really good professional friendships with my colleagues that I rely on throughout the year to sustain me. It’s soul-filling, especially in December! You come back and you’re fired up. It’s also amazing how impactful it is for the kids who go to SDLC, and to get to interact with them. They’re in a group where they’re no longer underrepresented, and they come back empowered to create new spaces and new conversations for other students, by using their voices collectively.”