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A Wing And A Prayer



Participants in the Operation Peter Pan mission gather at Guardian Angel Home in Peoria in June in front of the same tree as in photo at middle left. Seated, from left, are Pedro and Emilio Vázquez, Alberto Ferrán and Ana Ferrán Parent. Standing in back row, from left, are Carlos Gamez, Lourdes Muñoz Birba, Raúl Ley-Soto, Ricardo Jiménez and Rafael (“Big Ralph”) Fernandez.

Forty-seven years after leaving their homeland in a rush, nine Cuban-Americans come together to reunite and remember.

By Beatrice Pavia

Historical photos courtesy of Ricardo Jiménez

The laughter is loud, the energy electric, the smiles stretch wide. A few short days cram themselves full – road trips and religion, sunshine and charity, old memories, old pictures, old places, old friends.

Nearly a half century ago, the tentative roots of these bonds began, and for some, it’s been almost that long since they have seen each other. It is a reunion like all others – and really nothing like any of those others at all.

That is because these smiling people share a paradoxical past, blending minutiae of childhood with milestones of history. They are blissful-children-turned-instant-adults, long-ago baby-faced ambassadors of hope who gasped, then held their breath above the sucking current of world politics.

They know today what they couldn’t have then – that they would successfully navigate those uncharted waters. They feel today what they couldn’t fathom then – that, as children turned homeless in the blink of an eye, in certain ways they would always remain most at home with each other.

Throughout the pop, pop, pop of excited talk over the flow of the weekend, something routinely bubbles up, like a twirling eddy atop a turquoise sea – precise, pertinent and, for some, a purgatory:

Dec. 30, 1961.

Jan. 8, 1962.

April 22. April 26. May 19. July 27.

These are the dates that haunt their souls. On those days and in those years, new doors opened, while others sealed shut. The numbers herald a promise-filled start – a series of hellos, which eventually, they'd see, was really a countdown of last good-byes.

It was a time of dying to the self you knew, unsure and unaware as to who you would become.

On that date, you departed your nation a cherished child and landed elsewhere an orphan.

“My life changed in 45 minutes,” says **Ana Ferrán Parent**, PHD '76 LAS, of the voyage, “and we've been carrying that cross for 47 years.”

What follows is the tale of a priest, a plane and Peter Pan.

A REPLY TO REVOLUTION

Cubans are fond of describing their island as resembling an alligator resting after a full meal. In 1959, a panther struck.

Imagine that you are living a middle-class, if not privileged, life in Cuba. Imagine that you have a large, extended family and a good education. A revolution occurs. Terror and disruption ensue.

Imagine foreseeing a life of no freedoms for your children.

Just imagine.

The New Year opened with the revolutionary Fidel Castro ousting the island nation's corrupt dictator, Fulgencio Batista, and demolishing the Cuba that people knew. As he turned the country into a Communist state, Castro expropriated property, nationalized industry, reformed agriculture, controlled the media, imprisoned dissidents and believed in “revolution first, elections later.”

While a lot of Cubans weren't unhappy to see Batista go, they remained unsure of their new leader. Many believed he would be gone in a matter of months; a year later, however, Castro was entrenched, and a cloudbank of fearsome insecurity pressured the nation, dousing its bright colors and brighter music.

And the revolution extended its reach even further.

“The meaning of revolution is to destroy all from the past, to create new things,” Ana says.

What it broke most, she believes, is the family.

In the new Cuba, some parents said no to Fidel Castro's visions. Desperate to ensure a free and open future, mothers and fathers put their children on planes that jetted to Miami.

“Operation Peter Pan” – aptly named because it involved just children, and the children flew

away – took place from 1960 to 1962. Believing their families would be separated mere weeks or months, these parents sent more than 14,000 unaccompanied minors between the ages of 6 and 17 to the U.S.

Unlike the tale of Peter Pan, where boys fly off to avoid growing up, these parents were firmly committed to the reverse.

Rather than “second star to the right, straight on till morning” (Peter’s directions to the paradise of Neverland), Cubans pointed north and sent their children to America, not to escape responsibility but to become the best adults that they could.

It was an act of blind faith and brilliant courage.

It was unbelievable in its simplicity.

It’s incredible that it worked.

Among those who made that surreal journey – mostly alone – from the Caribbean to Miami to the Midwest were Lourdes Muñoz Birba, Diego del Pino, Rafael (“Big Ralph”) Fernandez, Alberto Ferrán, Carlos Gamez, Rafael Mederos, Leo Muñoz, and Pedro and Emilio Vázquez.

As part of that group, **Reynaldo Jiménez** ’69 LAS, AM ’70 LAS, PHD ’74 LAS; **Ricardo Jiménez** ’67 ENG, MS ’69 ENG; **Raúl Ley-Soto** ’68 ENG; **Ana Ferrán Parent**, PHD ’76 LAS; and **Luis Vera** ’70 LAS continued on to the University of Illinois.

‘ASK FOR GEORGE’

“Something told me I had to get out,” Raúl says. “Everyone in my high school knew they were going.”

In 1960, Castro closed secondary schools, sending young people to youth camps in the countryside to work in the fields, spread literacy and take up a revolutionary lifestyle. Talented students were sent to study in the Soviet Union. More than 200,000 people thought to be loyal to Batista were arrested.

“My father came from China to Cuba when he was 7 years old, fleeing Communism in China,” Raúl says. “He recognized Castro as a Communist. ... [The parents were saying], ‘We have to get the kids out of here before they go to the camps and get indoctrinated.’” The thought of girls and boys together in the countryside – far from parental or religious restrictions – troubled the parents as well.

To avoid that fate, a curious mix of bedfellows – Cuban parents, a U.S. administrator of an American school in Havana, the U.S. government and the Catholic Archdiocese of Miami – worked together to find a solution. They hatched a secret, massive effort, led by the young Monsignor Bryan O. Walsh in Florida, to save the children.

The details were simple, yet extraordinarily complex. Many of the children – more than half of whom had no contacts in the United States – were told by their parents to ask for “George” upon arriving at Miami International Airport. An employee of the Catholic Welfare Bureau, the Cuban-

born Jorge Guarch set up a small table, at which he created a meticulous list of names, birth dates and destinations. Despite Guarch's "Airport Log" being the only list made of this effort, not a single child among the 14,000 disappeared in the system.

From the airport, the refugees went to camps in Florida, where Catholic priests eventually conducted interviews. The children were then dispersed to relatives, foster homes or orphanages across the breadth of the nation.

One of those orphanages was Guardian Angel Home in Peoria.

PLAYING IT IN PEORIA

Steady is as steady goes, and such was the way of Peoria in the 1960s. The quintessential image of old-fashioned American values ("Will it play in Peoria?"), the modest, landlocked city had little in common with the flash of a thriving Caribbean metropolis.

Yet bringing these two cultures together was the challenge faced by the Rev. **Richard Mullen** '48 MEDIA, Guardian Angel's 37-year-old chaplain, who found himself in the middle of an international operation.

"The [Catholic] Church got word of the program and the need," he recalls, and all at once, the orphanage filled up with 14 young people who didn't speak English and brought almost nothing with them. The group, which included four pairs of siblings, comprised a dozen boys (15 to 18 years old) and two girls (aged 8 and 18). They came from Havana, Santa Clara and Holguin, but nobody but the siblings had known each other in Cuba. The arrivals were housed in separate wings by gender and age, with the new boys placed in the same set of rooms.

With Father Mullen guiding the youngsters to high school graduation, the stay for some children lasted a few months, for others up to four years. The short separation envisioned by their parents proved a huge miscalculation, as the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion and the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis – where nuclear war between the U.S. and the Soviet Union was narrowly avoided – severely compounded the situation. All eventually reunited with their families – some in two years, others not for decades.

Forty-seven years later, memories of their uprooting mix pain with adventure, fear with gratitude, understanding with anger. These adults are fiercely loyal to the United States, yet poignantly wistful for the life deprived them in their homeland. They are quick to laugh, quick to tear up, quick to say life turned out just fine. They are both tough and wounded. And every one views the families' agonizing decision as an act of complete desperation and a gesture of pure love. Nine of them – Lourdes, Big Ralph, Carlos, the Vázquez brothers, Ricardo, Raúl, Alberto and Ana – gather this year on a late June weekend in the neighboring cities of Champaign and Peoria. They are here as a group to pay their respects to Father Mullen and to return together to the place that protected them – Guardian Angel.

THE EARLY YEARS

“We pray that those who suffer and feel abandoned in their distress will find the presence of God close to them and that they will work to rescue others.” So prays Father Mullen at the Mass at which this year’s reunion begins.

Suffice it to say that the newly arrived Cubans back in the '60s had never before felt the presence of God in quite this way: These refugees didn’t merely attend church, they lived with their pastors.

Mullen and the Rev. Cy Schlarman, the priest who had interviewed and brought the children from Florida, took the kids clothes shopping and transported them to school and haircut appointments, handed out advice with one hand and bus money with the other. The boys learned to drive in Schlarman’s rickety old Chevy; Sister Amata taught homemaking skills. On the outside, the kids came to know English and the American way of life. On the inside, they learned that Schlarman flew airplanes, Mullen repeatedly played the song “Deep Purple” on the piano, and Sister had a “golden heart.”

“I was just doing what came naturally,” Mullen says decades later, but surely a lot must have been played by ear.

“Sometimes I couldn’t tell if they were mad at me or what,” he admits, until he got used to their excitable manner of conversation. “I’ll never forget,” he says, having to suspend the boys’ baseball games when too many girls came around to watch. While he attended to the children’s spiritual needs (even bringing in a Spanish-speaking priest to ensure sincere confessions), he also drove them around in his '61 Ford Fairlane and brought Ana to the doorsteps of campus when college rolled around.

Eight years after her arrival, Ana was married by Father Schlarman in the chapel of the orphanage. “I wouldn’t have it any other way,” she says. “My [first] son was baptized there in the orphanage. They were our surrogate parents – it was home.”

LEARNING TO REINVENT YOURSELF

Despite the stability and good will of Guardian Angel, the refugees, nonetheless, were coping with a situation they had never imagined.

It seems the oldest and the youngest suffered the most.

An 18-year-old Ana, sent to watch over her younger brother, Alberto, experienced culture shock. “Suddenly you’re here in a camp for refugees,” she recalls. “Eighteen girls in two bedrooms, one bath. I wore the same clothes for a month.” When she received a government voucher to buy clothing, her first purchase still brings a smile to her face: a pair of hot pink Keds.

But the stresses proved more than just physical. In contrast to the freewheeling ways of the U.S., Cuban girls were sheltered. “Every moment of my life was involved,” Ana says, with piano and typing lessons and other diversions.

“I went to nuns’ school all my life,” she says. “When you are raised with religion, you tend to be naive.” That proved a disadvantage in the U.S., “where 16-year-old girls were already driving, swimming. We only knew how to study.”

And for the older kids, it was also harder to forget.

“I remember everything as if it were yesterday,” Ana says. “I have constant flashbacks to Cuba, memories of walking by the ocean. ... The brain doesn’t let you forget. You wish you could, but you can’t.

“It’s part of our torture of having two identities,” she says. “We understand the sacrifices our parents did for us, but it left a deep wound in our soul.”

The road for Ricardo Jiménez, the oldest boy, and his brother, Reynaldo, was especially rocky. Shortly after arriving at the orphanage, they learned their politically active father and stepmother had been imprisoned, leaving their 2 ½-year old daughter out in the cold. “I was very angry,” Ricardo recalls. “It was the hardest part of the whole time.” The family would not see each other again for 18 years.

Lourdes “Lourdita” Muñoz Birba, who flew alone to the U.S. from Havana as an 8-year-old, was taken to the airport in Cuba just a few days after being notified she could leave. (Her teenage brother, Leo, had departed two months previous.) “Before I knew it,” she says, “I was on a plane and gone.”

The adventure quickly soured in Miami, where she realized her parents weren’t going to join her. The Muñoz siblings lived in separate camps for three months in Florida before going to Guardian Angel, where they were separated again by age and gender.

Of that time, Lourdes describes herself as “acclimated,” rather than happy.

“I would cry when I got mail from my mom,” she says. “My mother sent me lots of holy cards with messages; I kept them all.” To this day, she says, she remains sensitive to the needs of the very vulnerable and the very young.

Emilio Vázquez, at 14 the youngest boy in the group, was relieved with the order and safety that he found at Guardian Angel after living in Camp Kendall in Florida for eight months. (Ana recalls, “The girls lived in duplexes on base. The boys were like wild animals.”) “I felt pretty good in the orphanage,” he says, “being in a group together.” Nonetheless, he admits, “Sometimes I would have liked to have a father to talk to – I was missing the family touch.

“I always tell my kids they are lucky they have grandparents,” Emilio adds. “Mine were left behind.”

It may seem odd that so many photos exist of the children at Guardian Angel until one realizes they served as a diary of their life for their parents back home. Two things, the grown-up kids recall, were important: Show them pictures of you in the snow. And smile, so your parents would know their sacrifice had been worth it.

When the group tour their old quarters at Guardian Angel during the reunion, the men excitedly recall one memory after another. (“Here’s where my bed was!” “Wasn’t it here that we danced the ‘mashed potato’?”)

The two women weep.

SURVIVAL TACTICS

How does a young person – with little advance notice – leave family for a new country with no end game in sight? How did these child refugees cope?

For some, it was pure naiveté, for others the shock of reality. For the males, threat of military service in a Castro regime impelled their decision to depart. For all of them, a deep trust in their parents’ decision was their anchor.

“Our parents were not trying to get rid of us, they didn’t desert us – they did it for us,” says Ricardo. “I don’t remember seeing any of us crying or lonely.”

At Guardian Angel, the 12 boys developed a deep bond that made the transition easier. They slept six bunks to a room, went to high school together and, being teenagers, somewhat enjoyed the freedom from their parents.

“Guardian Angel provided structure and a support system for each of us,” Ricardo says. While individual friendships did occur, “in the photos, we’re all together, not in cliques,” he said. They also had two guideposts: the knowledge of what their parents wanted for them, and open and grateful hearts.

Carlos’ father tucked rum and cigars in his son’s pocket to sell for ready cash at the airport if necessary. The need didn’t arise, but his other instructions remained far more useful.

“A mental video plays in my head from the flight,” says Carlos, who was 15 when he arrived.

“Dad said, ‘I don’t know if I’ll see you again, but the only thing they can’t take away from you is what you learn.’ Many nights at the orphanage, I didn’t feel like doing homework, but I played that mental video and got up and studied.

“We knew what we wanted to do with our lives,” Carlos says. “We wanted to please our parents” by getting a good education.

They also saw their quarters at the orphanage as a huge step up from the camps. With their one bedroom, two study rooms and a recreation area, “we were spoiled,” Emilio says. “We had so much.”

“They were very good kids,” says Mullen. “I can’t remember ever getting them out of trouble.” (Though Father Schlarman once made the boys sleep outside when they missed curfew – an event which the men recall with glee).

And these children, who came from comfortable homes, weren’t afraid to work to realize their parents’ dream. “Big Ralph” and Leo dug graves by hand at nearby cemeteries (until Sister put

a stop to it); others shoveled sidewalks, waited tables, babysat and earned scholarships. "In this country," Ralph says, "if you have a will, there's a way."

Of the group, nearly all attended college. They became university professors, industry executives, entrepreneurs, engineers, consultants, businessmen and an air traffic controller. One lists his career as "American veteran."

"This was a heck of a support group," Ricardo says. "We have all turned out really decent." "Look at us, we are all so successful," Ana says. "We were not letting our parents down. We were making this sacrifice count."

RETURNING THE FAVOR

For one year, Ricardo works assiduously to create a reunion in Father Mullen's honor. The Cuban-American truly believes in the words of the James Taylor song that plays over and over that weekend: "Shower the people you love with love; show them the way you feel."

The few days involve Mass; meals; trips to Guardian Angel, Spalding High School and a kindly neighbor; a visit to Sister Amata's grave; and lots of gratitude.

A wide smile never leaves Father Mullen's face. He says he never felt so much a father figure as at the time of the reunion. "I didn't have that awareness," he says, "[of what I did for them] at the time."

But the Cubans do.

"It was a very sensitive time for us [back then], as many drastic changes have occurred in our lives," Emilio will write to Mullen after the weekend closes. "I believe that the reason why we have kept in contact among us for so many years as a group is because [Guardian Angel] is a place where we planted our roots at the beginning of our journey in this great country."

Raúl, a contractor who globe-trots around the world, credits nearly everything to the mentoring he received at Guardian Angel. "I don't think I'd be what I am today," he says. "I owe a lot to the Catholic Church."

And, he says, his voice tightening with emotion, "I try to pay my dues back."

At the reunion, the group presents Father with a plaque, which now sits in a prominent spot in his home.

The plaque reads: "Father Mullen, 47 years later we remain grateful to you."

It is signed: "The Cubans, Guardian Angel Home."

It ends with a new date, a much happier one, for all to remember: "June 27, 2009"

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