

Teacher finds plenty in adopted homeland

Hispanic Heritage month is September 15 to October 15. In 2009, The Orange County Register asked readers to tell their stories of the Cuban-American experience in Orange County, a half-century after Cuba's revolution. [The Cuban Revolution was an armed revolt that led to the overthrow of dictator Fulgencio Batista of Cuba on January 1, 1959 by the 26th of July Movement led by Fidel Castro.]The family of a woman in Santa Ana finds new prosperity after fleeing Cuba.

"Mrs. Martin, you're rich huh?"

Many times I get this question from my Hispanic students because I live in a two-story house, send my kids to private school, and live in a nice area of Santa Ana.

Perhaps they are not used to Hispanics who have done well for themselves.

I tell my students that I was not born with any of these things and they too have the same opportunities that I had. I tell them, "Go to college and get a degree and don't have kids until you can afford them." Then I tell them my story—that of most Cubans and other immigrants.

My family left Cuba after the revolution. We were not part of the communist party so my father automatically lost his job and was not allowed to work.

Life was difficult if you did not have a job. So the Cuban exodus began.

As a political refugee, I arrived in Miami in October of 1971 with my mother and two siblings. After landing, we went to the Tower of Liberty, the Ellis Island for Cubans.

Unlike other Cubans, we immediately went to Norfolk, Virginia, where my aunt—and sponsor—was living. We lived there for less than a year and then came to Santa Ana to join my dad, who had a job and a house waiting for us.

Santa Ana had a small Cuban community where everyone helped each other, either by babysitting or by giving rides to those without cars.

Think how hard it was for these adults who left their lives in Cuba. Most were in their thirties, with children, and did not speak English.

Cubans left with nothing. The Cuban government did not allow us to leave with anything. We all left with the clothes on our backs and nothing else. Most not only had to leave their comfortable lifestyles, but their families as well.

We knew we could not return. We had to make it here and we embraced the opportunity. Many women who had never worked outside the home were now part of the workforce. Those that were professionals were now doing manual work until something better came along.

Growing up bi-culturally was not always easy. There were many American customs my parents did not understand like slumber parties, sack lunches and dating before 18.

Many of the Cuban girls had to have chaperones when dating. Imagine bringing your abuela—your grandmother—on an innocent date with your friend Billy. Many of us dated within our own culture to avoid these uncomfortable situations.

I remember my first shopping experience being in a thrift shop and, like many of us, relying on the ever popular lay-away system.

My friends and I still laugh at our memory of lunch at school. Our sack lunches were not packed in pretty lunch bags nor did our sandwiches have the expensive deli meats. Instead we had a huge sandwich with a cut of ham from a pork butt wrapped in aluminum that was then packed in an even bigger grocery store paper bag.

Cuban kids learned quickly how to maneuver the two different worlds in and out of the house.

In those days we had a Cuban club where we would go every weekend with our parents and practiced the old Cuban customs like dances and other social norms. Like most kids of my generation, I started working at 15 and haven't stopped. I paid for my car and college. I worked at a fast food joint and two retail stores before finishing my teaching credential.

What other country in the world has embraced immigrants like the U.S.?

There is a reason why people want to come here. America is the only place where you are not bound to your social class. Anyone can walk out of their social and economic history and strive to be whatever they want. To some this may sound cliché, but to immigrants it is precisely the reason they want to be here. Anyone can reinvent themselves.

For all my parents' and friends' sacrifices, there were also many gains. My generation was more independent than my parents who had not worked at such a young age.

We also knew that we had more options than they ever had. My mom's generation got married much too young. Here, we were expected to go to college and hold off on marriage. All Cuban kids remember hearing the mantra we all grew up with: "The only thing that can't be taken away from you is your education."

Cubans have a very large percentage of college graduates among Hispanics. I'm sure it was that constant grilling from our parents to not end up in factory jobs like them. We knew we owed it to them to do better.

I know I will visit Cuba some day. I, however, will have to wait until there is a change in government. I, like all other Cubans, pray for the day that democracy makes a comeback. I will continue living in the U.S. because this is my country. The American flag is the one I display, not the Cuban. When Cuba competes against the U.S. in water polo, boxing, baseball, or any other sport, it is the U.S. that I root for. After all, this is the country that took us in when we needed a new beginning.

Cubans are very grateful to this country and we are probably the most patriotic of all Americans.

This September I will start my 20th year teaching and I will continue telling my students who think I am rich that they too have the opportunity that was given to me and to everyone living in this country. God bless America.

Review Questions

1. What created the Cuban exodus to the United States?
2. Why do you think Cubans have a different view on education than other Hispanic cultures?
3. Do you think Mrs. Martin's experience was a typical immigrant experience? Why?
4. Do you agree or disagree with her perspective on rooting for teams in international competitions? Why?