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# Progress Report: Cuban Refugees in the U.S.



Guillermo Tablada, Cuban lawyer now teaching in Miami, with wife Diana, his mother Carmen and son Guillermo Jr.

by Rob Elder

MIAMI, FLA.

**T**here are more than 600,000 of them, Cuban refugees, some still so new to the United States that they have barely unpacked the cheap suitcases in which they brought the wrinkled relics of disrupted lives.

Some have been here two years, some five or 10, hardly any more than 15.

Yet already they are America's newest chapter in the historic Horatio Alger saga of making it with hard work.

They've built and bought banks and schools; they own service stations and small shops by the thousands.

They live now in 48 of the 50 states, from Alaska and Hawaii to Montana and Minnesota. There are bustling Cuban colonies in Cincinnati, Atlanta, and Tarrytown, N.Y. A quarter-million Cuban-Americans are clustered along the northeastern seaboard, from Philadelphia to Boston.

Across the Hudson River from Manhattan, the first exit outside the Lincoln Tunnel is Union City, N.J., where Cubans make up 65 per cent of the population, own 60 per cent of the businesses and contribute more than half of the tax base. In West New York, N.J., seven of every 10 people are Cubans.

But the Cuban-American capital is Little Havana, a 600-square-block section of Miami, full of the sweet strong

aroma of Cuban coffee and the music and laughter of streets that come alive at night with strolling families, chatting and exchanging greetings in Spanish: "Buenos noches, señor! Como esta usted?" At least half of all the refugees live here. Midway between censuses, an exact count is impossible, but the current number of Cubans in Metropolitan Dade County, including children born in the U.S., is estimated at between 350,000 and 490,000.

They came, like America's most recent wave of refugees, the Vietnamese, fleeing Communism. Like the Vietnamese, the anti-Castro Cubans found

sympathy in the U.S. But Americans also asked many of the same questions now being voiced about the Vietnamese refugees:

Would they become a permanent drain on the welfare rolls? Would they take jobs away from native Americans? Would they learn English, adopt democracy, assimilate into the American way?

### The American dream

For the Cubans, answers already are emerging. No other group of American immigrants has ever done so well in so short a time. As one Cuban banker in Miami puts it: "Some people said the American Dream was dead. But the Cubans didn't know it was dead. America to us was still the land of opportunity."

And so, 16 years after Castro's takeover, 14 years after the Bay of Pigs, 13 years after the Cuban missile crisis, two years after the last of the Freedom

Flights that brought them to Miami, one thing is clear: For the refugees and their children, this is the new Cuba.

In 1962, when the influx of Cuban children alone was enough to fill 35 new school classrooms every month, the Cuban Refugee Center began operating out of an obelisk-shaped building in downtown Miami known as the Freedom Tower. A muddy brown relic of the city's stucco-baroque-rococo days and a former home of its afternoon newspaper, *The Miami News*, the tower was the starting point for 462,472 refugees who registered for aid from the U.S. government, and who, over the years, have received a total just beyond \$1 billion.

By 1974, the Freedom Tower was dingy and crumbling with age. The Cuban Refugee Center moved into an antiseptic new highrise on Miami's SW Eighth Street. Some 175,000 refugees still get \$90 million a year in federal aid, but compared to the boost the Cubans



Graceful Hispanic dancers remind Cubans of their cultural heritage at Columbus Day festivities in Miami's Watson Park;

refugees want to be Yanquis but insist that their children know the Latino way too in the nation's truest bilingual city. 27

have given the American economy, this is a drop in a bucket.

Cuban purchasing power in Miami alone is an estimated \$1.4 billion a year.

Eighth Street was a typically shabby inner-city row of vacant and dwindling storefronts when the Cubans began moving to Miami. Because rents were cheap, they settled there. Today, the street is *Calle Ocho*, main thoroughfare of Little Havana, home of bustling *farmacias* and Spanish restaurants and furniture stores and florists.

There are more than 20 Cuban clinics, health care centers where monthly dues entitle entire families to drugs and medical treatment at no further cost.

Cubans form a third of the Metropolitan Miami population. By 1980, they are expected to be the largest single ethnic group in the city's public schools and work force. Already, Cubans and other Latins constitute 70 per cent of downtown Miami's households, half of those in Hialeah, and a fifth of all the households on Miami Beach. Deep in the posh suburbs of southwest Dade County, lies the Big Five Club, made up of the membership of pre-Castro Havana's five fanciest yacht, tennis and country clubs.

### Privileged start

And that right there is the tip-off: From the beginning the Cubans came with a competitive edge over America's other Hispanos. As political refugees from Communism, they never had to worry about illegal immigration. Many were middle- or upper-middle-class merchants and professional men; not a few were millionaires who educated their sons and daughters in American prep schools and universities. Even census data mirror a dramatic difference: A third of the Puerto Ricans in the U.S. are below the poverty line, and

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## CUBANS CONTINUED

nearly a fourth of the Mexican-Americans, but fewer than 15 per cent of the Cubans.

One of every five employed Cubans holds a professional, technical or managerial job. Families headed by Hispanos are moving up the income ladder faster than Americans as a whole; and among persons of Spanish ancestry, Cubans are the most upwardly mobile.

### Successes abound

They've made it as individuals. In Cuba, Ernesto Freyre was a lawyer. In Miami, he went to work for a savings and loan association, negotiated the release of prisoners captured in the abortive Bay of Pigs invasion, ultimately became an officer of the nation's first bank totally owned and operated by Cuban refugees, Continental National Bank of Miami.

Hilario Candela was the son of a Havana physician. Now, at age 40, he is one of Miami's leading architects, designer of the Miami-Dade Community College downtown campus, which is revitalizing an entire inner city neighborhood.

Admittedly these are the exceptions. More typical is the garment factory started by a woman whose husband was still in prison in Cuba for anti-government activities. Arriving with a young son and daughter, the wife went to work in a Miami garment mill, got promoted to floor lady, saved enough to put the children through college and scrimped another \$8000 to start her own factory in 1971. Her husband finished his sentence and arrived soon afterward, and last year, the family business had 30 employees, \$209,000 in sales and plans for expansion.

### Professional classes

Until 1974, Miami had only about 30 Cuban lawyers. This year and next, 350 refugee attorneys will finish special courses to prepare them for the Florida bar exams. About 1000 Cuban physicians are licensed in Florida and another 400 will take the state medical exams in 1976. Other refresher courses are planned or underway for Cuban nurses, veterinarians, dentists, pharmacists and accountants.

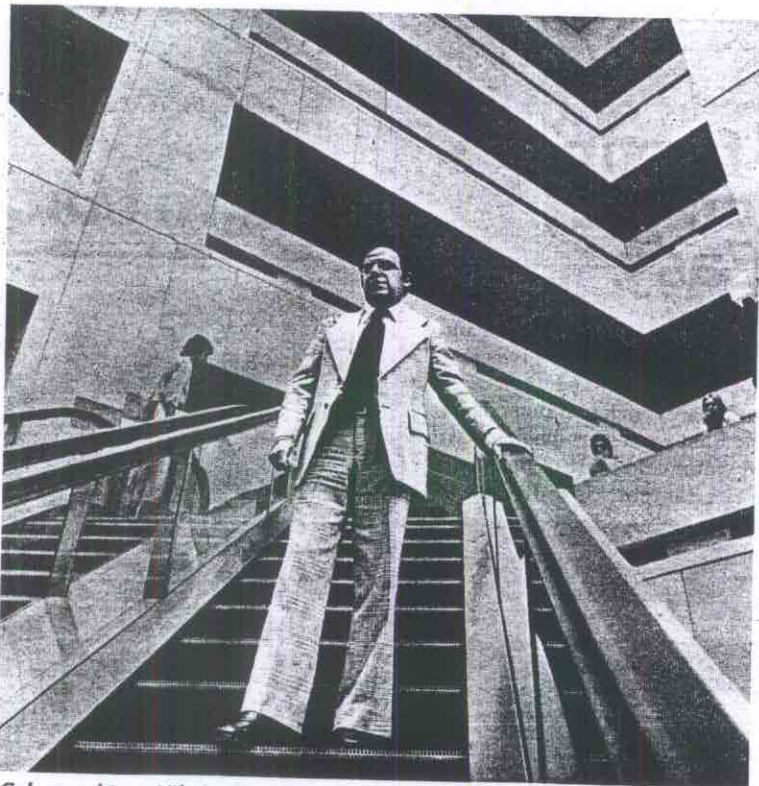
A Dade County government agency

estimates that 100,000 new jobs have been created in Miami, thanks to the Cuban influx.

Inarguably, the Cubans have changed Miami as much as it has changed them. The *guayabera*, a four-pocket shirt worn outside the pants, is now accepted office attire for Miami Anglos. University of Miami football games are broadcast in Spanish as well as in English. To get a job as ticket agent in Miami with at least one airline, you need both languages. With bilingual applicants clearly holding an edge in the Miami job market, an estimated



Continental National Bank of Miami is first to be owned, operated by refugees; officers are (l. to r.): Osvaldo Delgado, Ernesto Freyre, president Jorge Martinez.



Cuban architect, Hilario Candela and the college building he designed to help revitalize an inner city Miami neighborhood; his father was a Havana physician.

20,000 non-Latin adults a year are signing up to take Spanish courses.

Miami has four Spanish language radio stations. One television channel broadcasts entirely in Spanish, and another part of the time. *The Miami News* publishes a daily page *en espanol*, and *The Miami Herald* has announced plans to begin publishing an entire section in Spanish, seven days a week, beginning this winter.

Dade County has eight bilingual elementary schools where all students, Anglos and Cubans alike, learn both English and Spanish. All this has engendered some resentment; there are Miamians who dislike the Cubans for talking too fast in an alien tongue, for filling the sidewalks with music and spicy food smells, for taking over traditionally Anglo neighborhoods, for preempting jobs.

That point of view does not seem likely to prevail. Bilingualism and biculturalism are attractive to the old-line Miami power structure because they are good business, says one non-Latin Miami banker.

While the Cuban presence has been profitable, not all the profits have been legal. *Newsday* won a Pulitzer Prize by documenting the fact that Cubans have largely replaced Italian Mafia mobsters in controlling the flow of heroin through Miami. "Miami has become the cocaine capital of the world," *The Miami Herald* reported earlier this year, going on to say that much of this traffic, too, is controlled by Cubans.

Locally, Cuban youth gangs are a constant concern of Miami police. Two teen-agers died recently from gang clashes. Among Cuban adults, there lingers a touch of terrorism tracing back

to the pro and anti-Castro clashes of CIA days.

Knowledgeable Miamians agree that this violence is the work of a small group of diehards. But they also agree that despite efforts of the FBI and local police to end such terrorism it may recur sporadically.

For example, a prominent Miami Cuban, Luciano Nieves, spoke out in favor of coexistence with Castro last February and two days later was shot and killed in a downtown parking lot. The killers escaped. This fall a bomb blew out the windows of the Dominican Republic's Miami Consulate and phone calls to news media attributed the blast to Cuban terrorists, angered by the capture of another Cuban terrorist in the Dominican Republic.

### Wary after Watergate

The consensus in Miami, however, is that this is the last death rattle of an era whose end was signaled by the capture of four Miami Cubans in the Watergate burglary.

There was a time when the Cuban refugees would rally to any cause for "the company," as the CIA was known in Miami. Now the Cubans are more skeptical; they were burned at the Bay

of Pigs, and they were badly used in Watergate. Never again will they be so unwary.

Dr. Maria Cristina Herrera, executive director of Miami's Institute of Cuban Studies, cites the question that many of her fellow refugees are asking:

"What does it mean to become an American? Do we have to lose our background, our culture?"

For many of the Cuban refugees, whether in New Jersey or in the heart of Miami's Little Havana, the answer is no. They want to be Americans, but they don't want to disappear into the melting pot.

### National coalition

With the backing of Miami's Cuban community, Miami Mayor Maurice Ferre and U.S. Rep. Herman Badillo (D., N.Y.), both of Puerto Rican origin, recently launched a national coalition of Hispano-Americans. There are now 12 million Americans of Spanish ancestry, making up the nation's second largest minority. "It is our moment in the history of the United States," Ferre declares.

The Cuban refugee spirit was summed up in Miami the other day by a pretty young woman who is determined that her American-born son will not lose his Cuban heritage.

"He is 18 months old now, and I am making sure that he hears only Spanish at home," she said. "Growing up in the U.S., there is no way that he will not learn English fluently. He will not even speak with an accent, as I do. But I want him to learn Spanish first.

"He is an American, of course. But I want him to know that he is a Cuban, too."