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**1959:** Fidel Castro Leads an armed revolt against President Fulgencio Batista, establishing a revolutionary socialist state.



**1960:** Castro establishes trade with the Soviet Union, seizes all foreign assets in Cuba. U.S. retaliates with trade embargoes.

**1960-62:** More than 14,000 unaccompanied Cuban children emigrate to the U.S. via Miami as part of the Catholic Church's Operation Pedro Pan.

**1961:** President John F. Kennedy sends CIA-sponsored Cuban exiles to Cuba to overthrow Castro, a failed effort known as the Bay of Pigs Invasion.



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**1962:** U.S. spy satellites spot a Soviet missile base on the island, heralding the Cuban Missile Crisis.

# CUBANS & MIAMI

## A SHARED TALE OF TIME AND SUCCESS

BY JEFF ZBAR | JEFFZBAR@GMAIL.COM

**T**he tale of Miami's Cuban community is the quintessential American success story. Chased into political exile, they found a fledgling city they soon would call home. In time, an estimated 200,000 Cuban exiles – more than 14,000 of them children that emigrated as part of Operation Pedro Pan with hopes their parents would soon follow – were processed at the Freedom Tower [Torre de la Libertad], Miami's own Ellis Island.

Many of those who fled Cuba came from prominent families. They were educated doctors, lawyers and accountants – or their children. They were bankers, well-off retailers and large farm owners. Some were previous émigrés who had fled revolution in their countries and helped build Cuba, only to flee Castro's revolution and, again, start anew.

What they found in the U.S. was what Miami real estate broker Alicia Cervera Lamadrid called a “canvas” upon which to paint their – and Miami's – future.

That future grew into a national and hemispheric engine.

This special report, *Uniquely Us*, explores the indelible impact the Cuban American community has had on Miami and South Florida – and the impact Miami and the U.S. had on these immigrants. Together, they helped transform a historically young community into a thriving global destination, business mecca and the de facto capital of Latin America on U.S. soil.

### RIPE FOR GROWTH

Miami in the '60s was a city still in its infancy – younger than New York, Chicago or Cleveland – making it ripe for a new immigrant community to make its mark, recalls George Feldenkreis, who arrived with his wife in February 1961 and went on to found what would become international clothing company Perry Ellis International.

“Those were old cities with a social structure and all the establishment,” he says. “Miami was really a new city from the '20s. It was more apt to accept foreigners and newcomers than any of the older cities.”

Local commerce grew, especially around downtown Miami and Southwest Eighth Street – what would later become Little Havana, anchored by Calle Ocho. Although many arrived with little to nothing in their pockets – pharmacy retailer Jose Navarro left an upper-middle-class life and arrived in Miami at 16 with \$5 to his name – the city offered opportunity. Cubans patronized Cuban establishments. Those who had been doctors and lawyers back home and

struggled to resume those careers in America. Others were able to pick up where they left off.

For example, Diego Alonso owned La Epoca, one of Havana's largest retailers, which was confiscated by the government when the family fled in 1960. Five years later, Diego opened La Epoca in downtown Miami. There, it rode the ebbs and flows of Miami's economic cycles, until the family – son Pepe, and grandsons Brian and Randy – sold the property for \$20 million earlier this year.

Back in Havana, La Epoca today is the city's largest retailer, Pepe Alonso says. “But it is owned by [the government].”

Something uniquely Miami was its proximity to hemispheric capitals.

While pan-hemispheric traders flew past Miami on their way to New York for international deals, bankers who fled to Miami brought expertise in international commerce and finance. South Florida banks lacked such skill. And soon those former Cuban banking executives were to help transform

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COURTESY OF BRIAN C. ALONSO

Tony Alonso in front of La Epoca circa 1980.

the region's banking landscape by becoming their "international departments" and rising among the ranks of local financial institutions. In time, they were opening banks of their own.

Latin American shoppers, lured by Miami's growing appeal, flocked to the city. Some even called it the "Capital of Latin America." They joked how close the city is to the United States – "and they even speak English."

From business and industry to politics, "their mark on the community has been profound," says automobile magnate Norman Braman, who arrived from Philadelphia in 1969.

### HELPING HANDS – AND RACISM

Yet, the American dream didn't immediately reveal itself to the new arrivals. Though Miami was considered a "sister city" in tourism with Havana and there were more than 40,000 Cuban Americans here before Castro took control, immigrants still faced racism. Retail and apartment signs that read "No Cubans" were common in the '60s.

But so, too, were helping hands.

Many are the tales of friendly, even kindred former immigrants who knew the challenges the new arrivals faced. A generation before, many Jews who fled Nazis in Europe settled in Miami. Hence, Jewish merchants extended credit, spotted Cuban customers money when they were short at the cash register, or sometimes waived a security deposit on a storefront or apartment lease for them.

One such merchant was Julius Kasdin, a Russian émigré who settled in Miami Beach in 1939 and ran a drug store on Fifth Street and Ocean Drive. There, he would accept what his immigrant customers could afford to pay, says son Neisen Kasdin, managing

partner of the Miami office of law firm Akerman LLP. His wife, Ana, is a "Jewban" – a Jewish Cuban – who arrived in 1961 at the age of 6, the lawyer said.

Over time, Cubans – as well as émigrés from Central and South America, and the Caribbean – helped transform the region, Kasdin says. With the successive waves of immigration – the pre-1960s immigrants, the post-era exiles, the 100,000 that crossed the Straits of Florida as part of the 1980 Mariel Boatlift – and those who continue to arrive, Cubans played a significant role in revitalizing the region.

The result is what Kasdin calls America's first "post-ethnic city." Multicultural and multidimensional, locals here today look beyond labels.

"They don't care whether you're white, black, Hispanic, Jewish, gay," Kasdin says.

### AN INDELIBLE IMPRESSION

The Cuban stamp on Miami – and America – is undeniable.

The city is 70 percent Hispanic – and 54 percent Cuban American. The 1.78 million Cuban- or American-born Cubans in the U.S. represent 0.58 percent of the population. Yet, their contributions in various fields, including politics and business, can not be denied.

For example, three U.S. senators – Marco Rubio, Bob Menendez and Ted Cruz – are Cuban American. Fortune 500 CEOs of Cuban ancestry include Jorge Mas, chairman of MasTec, a company founded in 1969 by his father and anti-Castro activist Jorge Mas Canosa; Cuban-born Geisha Williams, who heads PG&E Corp.; and Roberto Goizueta, philanthropist

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**1980:** The Cuban government allows about 125,000 people to leave Cuba for the U.S. as part of the Mariel boatlift. Among them: several thousand Cubans released from jails and mental health facilities.

**1994:** The U.S. agrees to accept 20,000 Cuban immigrants annually.

**1998:** The U.S. eases restrictions on Cuban Americans sending money to relatives.

**1999:** Elián González, a 6-year-old Cuban boy, is ensnared in an international custody battle between his family in Miami and his father in Cuba.



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**2008:** Castro retires and hands the presidency over to his brother, Raúl Castro.

**2011:** President Barack Obama eases restrictions on travel to Cuba.

**2014:** Obama says his administration will begin talks to normalize trade relations with Cuba.



**May 2015:** The U.S. drops Cuba from list of states that sponsor terrorism; Cuba establishes banking ties with the U.S.

**July 2015:** Cuba and the U.S. reopen embassies.



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*Obama with Raul Castro*

**March 2016:** Obama becomes the first U.S. president to visit Cuba since Calvin Coolidge in 1928.

**Aug. 2016:** JetBlue Airways flies the first U.S. commercial flight to the island – from Fort Lauderdale to Santa Clara.



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**Nov. 2016:** Fidel Castro dies at 90. Hordes of Cuba-Americans take to the streets – including hundreds who gather at the historic Versailles Restaurant on Calle Ocho in Miami – to celebrate the dictator's demise.

**2017:** Obama announces an end to the 20-year-old "wet foot, dry foot" policy allowing Cuban migrants who reach U.S. soil to stay and become legal permanent residents.

**2018:** Senior Communist Party fixture Miguel Diaz-Canel becomes the first Cuban president in six decades who isn't a Castro.



COURTESY OF HISTORYMIAMI MUSEUM

*The Freedom Tower circa 1947, then known as the Miami Daily News Tower.*

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and former chairman and CEO of Coca-Cola.

Versailles Restaurant, "The World's Most Famous Cuban Restaurant" and a culinary institution in Miami, has served up Cuban cuisine, culture, and politics as the Cuban exiles' unofficial town square since 1971. The American Museum of the Cuban Diaspora captures the robust exile business, culture and civic history.

Even the *Miami Herald* launched a 20-page Spanish-language insert, *El Herald*, in 1976. Eleven years later, it became the stand-alone *El Nuevo Herald*. The company envisioned the Spanish-language section discontinuing within a few decades as Cubans and other arrivals from across the hemisphere assimilated, recalls Sam Verdeja, who worked at the publication at the time.

In fact, most Cubans never intended to stay long. They planned on returning once the regime fell, says Verdeja, who arrived at 25 and later co-wrote *Cubans: An Epic Journey*, a 782-page exploration

into the immigrants' history, experience and impact on American life, business, entertainment, media and politics.

"We didn't come to stay. We came as exiles to go back," he recalls. When an American and Soviet agreement cemented Castro's place in Cuba, "we realized there was no returning."

From professionals and entrepreneurs to eventual government leaders, "in every way of greater Miami life today, the dominance lies with Cuban Americans," says Paul George, a longtime Miami historian and professor at Miami Dade College.

"I've never seen anything like it, and I don't think anybody has. A city in America [that within two generations] came under the direction of the immigrants themselves," he says. "The irony, of course, is they came over [thinking]: 'This is impermanent. This isn't forever."

"Castro will be gone."

But, luckily for Miami, it didn't happen that way. "They became citizens, residents and just transformed this place," George said.

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## **Q&A** ALICIA CERVERA LAMADRID *Managing partner, Cervera Real Estate*



JOCK FISTICK

*Alicia Cervera Lamadrid, principal at Cervera Real Estate.*

### **Do you believe culture can be a competitive advantage?**

It can be a competitive advantage and a disadvantage. If you have a culture of morality, of hard work, of values, of family, of community, of respect, of course that makes you more successful. The advantage of the Cuban people was that they were the cream of the Cuban people skimmed off the top and we came over. When you have a significant number of these people coming over together, there's a shared strength in numbers.

### **Do you think being Cuban American instilled unique qualities in you that led to your success in business?**

My brother, who was born in the U.S. and is 10 years younger, said: "You have to get over the starving immigrant mentality." But there's a sense of urgency that doesn't ever leave you. We get up every morning because we need to go to work, to pay our bills – or because we think we need to go to work to pay our bills. There's that drive that's truly based out of necessity, to get you out of bed for work, to save for and invest in your business, and to constantly be building.

### **What can other immigrants learn from the Cuban American story?**

The lesson is the same for all: The

opportunity is here. You just have to do it the American way. You can add your own spices, but the beef is American. I tell that to men who are very successful developers in their country. If you're going to do it the way they do it in your country, you're going to fail. That's my biggest message to immigrants when they arrive. You've left your country to come here for a reason: because Americans do it better than anybody.

### **What role do you believe Cuban immigrants played in establishing Miami as an international destination?**

Places assume their own place in destiny and history. But, without a doubt, the Cuban American community is the tip of the arrow. We blazed this trail. We came to what was a beautiful canvas and built a beautiful city. And no one will ever take that away from us. But we came to the right city and country. If I had gone to any other country in the world, I wouldn't have been able to do it. One of the amazing things is that the American people allowed this to become a bilingual city. It was the biggest gift they could have given us and, ultimately – as happens often with gifts – it turned into the biggest gift we gave to Miami.