

Operation Pedro Pan: The Flight to Neverland for more than 14,000 Cuban Children

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Ivonne Garay was just finishing fifth grade in her native Cuba when her world was turned upside down. It was April 1961 and a military invasion of the island by Cuban exiles based in Miami, Florida, had been unsuccessful. At Ivonne's school, teachers had taken students outside to see the captured men:

They paraded the men in trucks and then they asked the school to bring out the kids so that they could throw things at them. I remember how upset that made my parents—and not because they were not with Castro, because they were Castro supporters at the beginning—but that whole scene, the cruelty of it...I remember my parents picking us up at school and saying, "This might be the last day that you come to school." We didn't return.¹

Just a few months later, Ivonne boarded an airplane with her older sister and younger brother, bound for the United States. Each child had a small bag filled with three outfits and one pair of shoes. Her parents were not granted permission by the Cuban government to exit the country, but they were assured that they would be able to rejoin their children a few days later. The family would not be reunited until 18 months later.

Operation Pedro Pan

On January 1, 1959, Fidel Castro and his army of bearded revolutionaries had swept through Havana ousting the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista. Although Castro at first denied that the revolution was communist, it soon became apparent that the new government was indeed part of the global socialist movement. Of the many changes instituted, several of the main ones were reforms in education. For example, a massive literacy campaign was launched, compulsory schooling was extended to all children under the age of 16, and more students gained access to higher education. Private schools were closed or taken over by the government, state-run dormitories run as boarding schools were established, and daycare centers were opened. Some parents began to fear communist indoctrination in school curricula or the possibility of children being sent to labor camps or military schools. Soon, rumors began to spread of *patria potestad*, that is, the

Courtesy of Ivonne Garay Blank.



Ivonne Garay is pictured here at the end of fifth grade in Las Villas, Cuba

Resources for Teaching about Operation Pedro Pan

Print Resources

Conde, Yvonne M. *Operation Pedro Pan: The Untold Exodus of 14,048 Cuban Children*. New York: Routledge, 1999.

Eire, Carlos. *Learning to Die in Miami: Confessions of a Refugee Boy*. New York: Free Press, 2010.

Torres, Maria de los Angeles. *The Lost Apple: Operation Pedro Pan, Cuban Children in the U.S., and the Promise of a Better Future*. Ypsilanti, Mich.: Beacon Press, 2004.

Triay, Victor Andres. *Fleeing Castro: Operation Pedro Pan and the Cuban Children's Program*. Gainesville, Fla.: University Press of Florida, 1999.

Online Resources

Carlos Eire: A Cuban-American Searches for Roots: An article and accompanying NPR interview of a Pedro Pan child, based on his memoir, *Learning to Die in Miami*. www.npr.org/2010/11/22/131449904/carlos-eire-a-cuban-american-searches-for-roots

Escape from Havana: This website accompanies the CNBC documentary of the same title. Profiles of Pedro Pan children, a slide show, and links to other websites are provided. www.cnbc.com/id/37062515

Florida's Hispanic Heritage: The K-12 curriculum materials found on this website were developed in conjunction with a recent conference commemorating the Florida Quincentennial. A lesson on Operation Pedro Pan can be found in the Elementary section. http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/las_hhfc/K-12_Curriculum_Materials

Latinas in History: This interactive project includes essays, a timeline, and teaching materials. Look for the lesson on Operation Pedro Pan under 'Sample Classroom Resources.' <http://depthome.brooklyn.cuny.edu/latinashistory/latinashistory.html>

The Legacy of Operation Pedro Pan: In 2011, the National Museum of American History organized a roundtable discussion on the Legacy of Operation Pedro Pan that featured former Pedro Pan kids as well as human rights scholars. www.c-span.org/Events/The-Legacy-of-Operation-Pedro-Pan/10737423427

The Miami Herald: The newspaper hosts an interactive database of articles, photos, video, and memoirs related to Operation Pedro Pan. www.miamiherald.com/pedropan

Operation Pedro Pan Group, Inc.: This non-profit group was established to document the history of Operation Pedro Pan and reunite individuals who were part of the exodus. The site includes archived newsletters, links to other resources, and a media gallery with photographs of children and families at the airports in Havana and Miami and of the Pedro Pan kids with their foster families in the United States. www.pedropan.org

government assuming legal guardianship of their children.

Some parents, like those of Ivonne Garay, decided to send their children to the United States as part of a program that became known as Operación Pedro Pan, named after the children's character Peter Pan. In the end, the political exodus would last 22 months and involve more than 14,000 children. Because the parents could not easily obtain permission to leave the country, they sent their children unaccompanied under regular immigration rules, with plans for reunification in the near future. Some families were reunified within a year, others in several years, but some children did not see their parents again until they were adults.

The Role of the Catholic Church

When the revolutionary government officially declared itself atheist, anti-religious policies were introduced in the predominantly Roman Catholic country. Many priests, bishops, and other Church officials were expelled from the country. The holdings of the Catholic Church were included in the nationalization of all property. Concomitantly, the Catholic Church in the United States was helping Cuban exiles settle in their new home.

In Miami, Florida, the Catholic Archdiocese was working with the U.S. government to help resettle Cuban exiles who began to pour into the city soon after Castro's coup. In early December 1960, James Baker, the director of the American Ruston Academy in Havana, visited Miami. There he met with Father Bryan O. Walsh, a young Irish-born Catholic priest who directed the Catholic Welfare Bureau. Baker and Walsh began devising a plan to get Cuban children out of the country. Later, Walsh described Operation Pedro Pan as "our project to fly the children out of Cuba."²

At first, the children traveled with regular visas and often on tickets funded by American businesspeople who sympathized with the exiled Cuban community. Once diplomatic relations between Cuba

Cuba and Florida have much in common due to their shared links to Spain and their physical proximity. These two landmasses have a mutual history that, at times, has been very fraternal, at others, antagonistic. Over the last five centuries, the two have shared numerous historical events, industries, and a shared economy. This insert features brief descriptions of the following topics and a different suggested teaching strategy for each.

Cuba and Florida: Teaching about Shared Histories

Mario Minichino

Once dominated by the United States, Cuba has often been closely aligned to U.S. interests since the American Revolution of 1776. Located at the confluence of trade winds and sea currents, Cuba's unique location brought Spanish settlers to the island, and acted as the transit point for New World treasure heading to Spain. Interest in *La Florida* began almost as soon as the island of Cuba was claimed by Spain. The Spanish Crown sent excursions along the eastern shoreline of the North American continent, seeking Native Americans to serve as enslaved workers to replace the

dwindling Taíno population of Cuba. The lands around the Gulf of Mexico beckoned Spanish explorers in search of gold and converts to Christianity.

In 2013, we commemorate the 500th anniversary of Juan Ponce de León's landing near present-day St. Augustine in Florida and the birth of extensive Spanish influence in the New World. Below you will find several teaching strategies that will help your students explore the rich shared histories between Florida and Cuba.

The Spanish American War

The Spanish American War (1898) was a relatively short conflict that came at the end of the Cuban War for Independence (1895–1898). The city of Tampa, Florida, played a major role in the conflict due to several factors, such as the proximity of Tampa to Cuba, the extensive railroad system in Florida, and the deep Port of Tampa, where the U.S. military chose to amass troops before embarking for the short trip to Cuba.

Teaching Strategy: One obvious method to show the physical proximity of Florida to Cuba is through a mapping activity. This can be as simple or as complex as desired. Visual learners in particular will benefit from maps that identify features such as Tampa Bay, railroads in Florida and Cuba, the route ships followed to reach Santiago, Cuba, and other physical features such as the mountainous terrain of Eastern Cuba.

Immigration

Historically, waves of immigration from Cuba followed periods of conflict and economic strife on the island. In the months following the Cuban Revolution of 1959, a mass exodus occurred that split families apart. More recent immigration from Cuba to the United States has included The Mariel Boatlift, where tens of thousands of Cubans fled their homeland in 1980, and the *balseros* (rafters) who arrived in the late summer of 1994.

Teaching Strategy: A guided imagery exercise crafted from first-person accounts,

and coupled with reflective journals can situate students in the experience of a rapid and forced exodus. By adjusting the depth of information and providing vivid details, this strategy can lead young, as well as older students, through the lived experience of migrants to a land they do not know. Class discussions and the use of student journals can add to the exploration.

Economic/agricultural ties

One enticing feature of Cuba to the Spanish explorers was the tropical climate and fertile soil of Cuba's central valley, ideal for growing sugarcane, coffee, exotic lumber, and tobacco. During the harsh conditions of the Ten Years War (1868-1878) and the Cuban War for Independence (1895-1898), many agricultural and manufacturing businesses closed or relocated. Several reopened in the Florida cities of Key West, Tampa, and Ybor City.

Teaching Strategy: Through the use of a photo analysis worksheet, available from the National Archives (www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/photo_analysis_worksheet.pdf), have students examine photographs of cigar making factories in Cuba and Florida. Period photographs of cigar workers can be located on the Internet by searching for "Cuban cigar factories." Once students have developed questions relating to the photographs in step three of the worksheet, direct them on a web-quest to discover answers to the questions they developed. This can be done in class or as homework, and in

groups, pairs, or individually.

Cuban Revolution of 1959

As the new year unfolded, Cuban revolutionaries led by Fidel Castro defeated federal troops and the government of Fulgencio Batista. In the first years of the revolution, the new government faced many challenges, not the least of which were a lack of food, money, and experienced professionals. To overcome these problems, the revolutionaries tried many solutions; some worked and others failed. The lack of trained bureaucrats to run the daily workings of the government eventually caused tremendous hardship for the people of Cuba.

Teaching Strategy: Real-world problem solving encourages students to assume the roles of adults in society to overcome actual problems faced by individuals and societies. Divide students into groups and present them with several problems faced by the revolutionaries in the months following the revolution. Ideas for problems to solve can include: schools and education, banking, basic services like food and water production, and security and safety (police and fire). By working in groups where students collectively develop strategies, individuals can combine their ideas to produce a solution difficult to achieve alone.

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and the United States were severed in January 1961, however, Walsh was given authority by the U.S. Department of State to circumvent the regular immigration procedures and allow entry to Cuban children aged 16 years and younger.

Who Were the Children and Where Did They Go?

The first children arrived in Miami in late December 1960. They ranged in age from 3 to 16 years, with about 60 percent of them being adolescent boys. Most of the children had attended Catholic schools in Cuba. At least 300 of the Pedro Pans were Jewish and 700 were Protestant.³ Although the majority of the children were from upper middle class families, all socioeconomic classes were represented.

Courtesy of Ivonne Garay Blank



Ivonne Garay (top bunk) with a fellow Pedro Pan, shortly after arriving in the U.S. on 1962.

While they awaited their parents' arrival, roughly half of the children were placed with family or friends in the United States. But those who had no relatives were sent to orphanages, group homes, boarding schools, and foster families. Ivonne Garay was sent to the Queen of Heaven Orphanage in Denver, Colorado. She remembers:

When we got to the orphanage in Denver we were only allowed to have three things in our locker. All of our clothes were mostly cotton. It was very cold, so all the clothes we brought were put away. They had a closet of donated clothes where you could pick out some-

thing. My parents actually had seen a picture of us wearing some of these clothes and were kind of horrified. I had lost some weight, of course, and the clothes didn't fit.⁴

In addition to the distress of being separated from their parents and going to live in a new country where they did not know the language, many Pedro Pan children suffered the additional pain of being separated from their siblings, since the children were grouped by age and gender. Eventually, Pedro Pan kids were placed in 35 states.

Some of the placements—especially those in juvenile homes and orphanages—resulted in trauma and maladjustment for the children. There were also reports of abuse at the hands of some teachers and nuns.⁵ However, many of the Pedro Pan children placed with foster families had positive experiences and remained in contact with them.

Aftermath and Controversy

In October 1962 the Cuban missile crisis led to the termination of commercial airline flights between Cuba and the United States. Operation Pedro Pan came to an abrupt halt.

In recent years there has been controversy around the role that the CIA may have played in the program. Some have speculated the CIA spread rumors that the Castro regime was scheming to usurp parental rights in order for children to be taken from their families for the purposes of socialist indoctrination. The CIA has repeatedly denied any involvement in the exodus and has refused to honor Freedom of Information Act requests, further fueling the speculation.

The Pedro Pans are now adults mostly in their 50s and 60s. As a group, they have been very successful in the United States, professionals in business, law, medicine, education, and entertainment. In the case of Ivonne Garay, she became an elementary school teacher, married an American, and went on to have two children of her own. She credits the difficult experiences she had as a child with

strengthening her commitment to the protection and education of children. She attends organized reunions held by the Operation Pedro Pan Group and also stays in contact informally with children she met in the orphanage as well as with the American students who were kind to her when she arrived in the United States; she recalls:

The first Christmas that we were in Denver, separated from our parents, my sister and I were also separated from our brother. [Boys and girls were placed in different orphanages.] This family—the Brownlee family—went to my brother's orphanage to take someone out for Christmas. When they asked my brother what he would like for Christmas, he said he wanted to be with his sisters. So they turned around and came to our orphanage and said, "Well, we'll just take out all of you, so that you can have a Christmas together!" Wonderful family. We maintained contact with them for years.⁶

Teaching about Operation Pedro Pan

Although Operation Pedro Pan was the largest recorded exodus of unaccompanied minors in the Western Hemisphere, most U.S. history textbooks make no mention of it. Its omission in the national historical narrative is unfortunate given that not only was it a significant event in its own right—because of its significance in U.S.-Cuba relations and with respect to immigration to the United States—but because it involves the experiences of young people, it can also provide personal relevance for K-12 students. Students and teachers alike are fascinated by the personal accounts that are available in print and online.

Active learning strategies such as guided imagery, role-playing, and simulations can bring the necessary affective dimension to the study of the event. Students can consider what it might have



Cubans' First Meal in Denver

Sitting down to their first meal with their children in more than 14 months, Dr. and Mrs. Gumersindo Garay enjoy the warm hospitality of the Sisters at Mt. St. Vincent's home for boys, Denver. The Garays, who sent their three youngsters out of Cuba in November, 1961, to escape indoctrination in Communist-dominated schools, rejoined their son and two daughters in Denver after an adventurous escape from the island in a 14-foot skiff. Dr. Garay, a cancer specialist, is seeking a position as a laboratory or X-ray assistant in Denver until he can take the required examination to practice medicine in this country.

Showing by their smiles how much they enjoy playing host to the Garay family are, standing, from left, Sisters Daniel, Mary Gaberial, and John Gaberial of Mt. St. Vincent's home staff. Seated around the table are Bill Greebling, a staff member of the archdiocesan Catholic Charities; 14-year-old Ivonne Garay, Dr. Garay, 10-year-old Gustave, Mrs. Hilda Garay, 15-year-old Annabella, and Louise Lepore, a Catholic Charities social worker. The Archdiocesan Catholic Charities office, which has been caring for the Garay children since their arrival in the U.S., sponsored the trip to Denver for Dr. and Mrs. Garay.

This newspaper article appeared soon after Ivonne Garay was reunited with her family in 1963.

been like to board an airplane to a new country, unaccompanied by parents and unable to speak the language. They could also role-play what Cuban parents might have discussed as they made the heart-wrenching decision to send their children to the United States.

Primary source documents such as photographs, newspaper articles, and memoirs exist in fair abundance given that this event occurred in the recent past (see "Resources for Teaching about Operation Pedro Pan"). Students can analyze historical photographs, read first-person accounts, and examine how the event was covered in the media.

Historical fiction such as *The Red*

Umbrella by Christina Gonzalez (Knopf Books for Young Readers, 2010) can help students envision what it might have been like to be a Pedro Pan teen in 1961. Young adult books like María Armengol Acierno's *The Children of Flight Pedro Pan* (Silver Moon Press, 2004) provide a personal perspective on the push and pull factors involved in immigration. 🌍

Notes

1. Ivonne Garay Blank, personal interview, October 23, 2012.
2. Bárbara Cruz, "Operación Pedro Pan," in *Latinas in the United States: A Historical Encyclopedia* (Volume 1), ed. Vicki L. Ruiz and Virginia Sánchez Korrol. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 541.

3. Ana Rodriguez-Soto, "Pedro Pan: Making History in Slow Motion," Archdiocese of Miami (December 15, 2011), www.miamiarch.org/ip.asp?op=Article_111213215131534.
4. Garay Blank, personal interview, October 23, 2012.
5. Yvonne M. Conde, *Operation Pedro Pan: The Untold Exodus of 14,048 Cuban Children* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Maria de los Angeles Torres, *The Lost Apple: Operation Pedro Pan, Cuban Children in the U.S., and the Promise of a Better Future* (Ypsilanti, Mich.: Beacon Press, 2004).
6. Garay Blank, personal interview, October 23, 2012.

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