Fresh from Cuba, this 19-year-old quickly taps into MDC courses and Miami Hack Week and is now a developer

BY Krysten Brenlla
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Miami has that tight-knit, diverse community we need to be successful in tech, and as a Spanish-speaker from Cuba, I was able to fit in and make the connections I needed' – Adrián Valdés

While on a plane to the US Embassy in Guyana, where Cuban immigrant visas are processed, just one word crossed the mind of 19-year-old Adrián Valdés, a Havana-born son, brother, and developer: "family."

Living in a communist island with limited resources, Valdés saw the American Dream from afar – the free, unlimited resources available for those who wanted them; the endless stream of opportunities for those looking to make it; and a new place to call home, in Miami, that would provide him with everything he needed to support his family. His father had arrived in the United States before the tumultuous COVID-19 pandemic, and Valdés was only a few steps away from joining him in the land of the free – until March 2020, the world shut down, the ports and terminals closed, and Valdés soon found himself stuck in Cuba with no school, limited access to the internet and resources – and A LOT of free time on his hands.

"I wanted to pursue my education, which is why I really wanted to come to America," said Valdés, now a remote front-end developer for Hogarth Worldwide, a global marketing and advertising agency based in London. "Now, two years later, is when my Cuban friends are going back to school. I wanted more," he said.

For months after the global shutdowns, Valdés was learning how to code in his home in Santiago de las Vegas, Havana, Cuba, through free Coursera courses, or any free online resources he could get his hands on, until the Cuban government decided to shut down the internet for the night.

Then, he would wake up the next morning and do it all over again.

"I fell in love with technology. In Cuba, I studied at the Vocational Pre-University Institute of Exact Sciences Vladimir Illich Lenin, and when it was time to go to college, I decided to enroll in Computer Science to explore what the tech world really had to offer," he said.

On April 28, 2021, Miami started to feel more like home for Valdés after he aced his interview and earned his American residency. He was the only one in his family that was able to work, and after a few months in Miami, Valdés learned how to drive and landed a full-time job at an electronics store in Dolphin Mall.

But on his free time, he was working as a freelance developer for small businesses in Miami and news blogs in Havana, studying at Miami Dade College's Idea Center to earn free certifications, such as Google IT Automation with Python, and taking non-credit tech courses at Miami Dade College. That's where he met his advisors and mentors, Antonio Delgado, Vice President of Innovation and Technology Partnerships at Miami Dade College, and María Carla Chicuén,

Founding Executive Director of FIU's CasaCuba, who helped kick-start his new college life and career.

Moas signaled there is more to come on the tech talent front. One area Knight is interested in is reimagining higher education's career services, and through its recent funding of FIU, one of the projects will be contracting with a globally renowned design firm to help do just that within FIU's College of Engineering. A reimagined Career Services model could then be rolled out to MDC and other higher ed institutions.

 "Where there's opportunity to continue to innovate and meet the community and industry where they are today is around Career Services, career pathways — how we help students and companies find one another at the right time in the right way and in a way that leads to the best outcomes possible," Moas said. "Right now those systems are in urgent need of reimagination."

Moas believes this new investment in MDC, together with the Knight's previous investments in FIU, UM and CodePath last year, come at the right time for the Miami tech ecosystem.

"What I'm hearing from university leaders across the region is an absolute commitment to reimagine and reinvent all parts of the pipeline."

Miami Dade College's Antonio Delgado with Hack@Campus participants, including Adrián Valdés

"Maria Carla and Antonio have been my guardian angels throughout my journey in Miami," said Valdés. "They helped me through the SAT process and application process to get into college, they guided me through Miami Dade College, they presented Miami's first Hack@Campus and FIU's Upsilon Pi Epsilon's Shellhacks to me – they basically gave me the guide I needed to navigate a new country while landing my dream job," said Valdés. He was on one of the winning student hackathon teams at Miami Hack Week in

January.

Adrián Valdés was part of a winning team of Hack@Campus, part of Miami Hack Week

Now as a front-end developer at Hogarth Worldwide, Valdés develops and maintains websites for global clients, such as Coca-Cola and Apple, while working from home in Miami and supporting his family. He also works on client HTML designs for email campaigns and internal automation tools for faster and more efficient programs and software.

"It's only been 10 months since I arrived in the United States, but since I've been here, I've learned so much with the help from great people in our community," Valdés continues. "Miami has that tight-knit, diverse community we need to be successful in tech, and as a Spanish-speaker from Cuba, I was able to fit in and make the connections I needed."

When asked for his advice for the next tech dreamer, Valdés wanted to share a crucial tip that led to his once-in-a-lifetime opportunity: getting involved and reaching out to people.

"That's the only way you will land your dream opportunity," said Valdés. "Don't be shy, ask for help. You will get it if you do – especially in Miami."

Adrián Valdés in Cuba, with his mom and grandmother on high school graduation day. He helps support his family with earnings from his tech career.

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