



EDUCATION

Three Cuban students go from MIA to MIT

BY WALTER VILLA
wvilla07@yahoo.com

October 17, 2018 07:41 PM
Updated 1 hour 37 minutes ago

Jose Muguira Iturralde opened the door to the cavernous lecture hall and he was shocked.

This was at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, otherwise known as MIT, one of the world's greatest universities, with a tradition dating back more than 150 years.

Muguira walked into lecture hall 26-100 on Sept. 5 with close friends Sabrina Romero and Osvy Rodriguez. The three share a similar history, each making a nearly miraculous trek from Havana to Miami to the hallowed halls of MIT.

But even with the support of his fellow students, Muguira was petrified as he took a look at the setting for his first MIT class, Introduction to Biology.

Be the first to know.

No one covers what is happening in our community better than we do. And with a digital subscription, you'll never miss a local story.

SIGN ME UP!

“I knew that this was MIT. I knew this was going to be difficult,” said Muguira, 20. “But I had never been in such a big class with 500 students. I knew I was never going to build a relationship with the professors. If I needed help, I wasn’t going to be able to talk to them.”

Muguira — who had taken four years of biology from high school through MDC — said this was no beginner’s course.

“We jumped right into advanced bio-chemistry,” he said. “I had never in my life seen the advanced biology that I saw in my first class at MIT.”

Unlike Muguira, Romero, a 20-year-old computer science major, said her primary emotion was excitement when the doors to 26-100 swung open.

“It was like, ‘I’m finally where I’ve been wanting to be for a long time.’ I don’t even like biology, but the professor made it so interesting,” Romero said. “That’s what I love about this place.”

Rodriguez, a 24-year-old electrical engineering major, said he is savoring every moment at MIT.

“I had to leave Cuba through Ecuador and cross Mexico to get asylum in the United States,” Rodriguez said. “Once I got to Miami, I had to learn English on my own, in a library, for a year. Then I went to Miami Dade College.

“It was a long journey. When I got to that classroom at MIT, I knew I had done something good. It wasn’t the end of the story. I still need to focus on school. But my dream was closer.”

Muguira and Romero knew each other in Cuba, and both of them met Rodriguez at MDC. All three had studied at a pre-university institute of exact sciences in Havana known as “La Lenin.”

Rodriguez said La Lenin gave him, Muguira and Romero an educational foundation.

“We see math problems the same way because of the education we received in Cuba,” Rodriguez said.

There was just one rather major problem, however. Because of the communist system in Cuba, educated students have nowhere to go to shine.

At least not on the island.



From left, Cuban-born, Miami-raised students Jose Muguira Iturralde, Sabrina Romero and Osvy Rodriguez now attend at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Photo provided to the Miami Herald

Dreaming big

Internet access is hard to come by in Cuba. But whenever Romero was able to get online back home, she would google MIT and Harvard and learn about their campuses and course offerings.

For Romero, attending such a university seemed like an impossible dream — a fantasy.

But at age 17, Romero — an only child — left her beloved mother, Tania Arrazcaeta, in Cuba and came to Miami, where her father lives.

“It was the hardest decision I’ve ever made,” Romero said.

“My mom is my best friend,” she said. “But I’m here now at MIT, and I know it’s worth it because I can give her the best future. In Cuba, there was no future. I was going to live a frustrated life. I could get an education, but it would only be theoretical. I could never apply what I know, and that’s just cruel.”

Rodriguez knows this first-hand. His mother, who is still in Cuba, is an engineer. But her salary is so low that she instead works as a waitress to make ends meet.

Meanwhile, when Romero arrived in the U.S. in November 2015, she went to Miami High, where her dreams were almost crushed. Some administrators wanted to place Romero in night school.

Fortunately for Romero, night school academic advisor Aurora Couzo argued on her behalf.

“I reviewed her credits form Cuba, and her grades were amazing,” Couzo said. “I think her lowest grade was 96.”

Romero then aced every test Couzo gave her, and her dream was back on track. She went to day school at Miami High, achieved outstanding grades and landed at MDC’s Honors College.

Without Couzo, Romero said, she wouldn’t have gone to the Honors College, and without that support, she wouldn’t be at MIT.

After all, only 25 transfer students per year — worldwide — make it to MIT each year, and three of them in 2018 came from MDC.

“When I got accepted to MIT, I went back to see (Couzo),” Romero said. “I was crying tears of joy.”

Said Couzo: “I’m so proud of Sabrina. She’s one of those success stories I tell my current students about all the time.”

Teaming up

Muguira, who is majoring in computer science, has a close bond with Romero and Rodriguez. They helped each other with the college-application process, and, at precisely 3:14 p.m. on May 4, they started a joyous group-text session during which they simultaneously found out online they had been accepted to MIT.

The next day, on May 5, they graduated from MDC.

“I saw the word ‘congratulations,’ and I stopped reading,” Muguira said of his MIT email. “I knew that ‘congratulations’ cannot be bad news. I immediately felt emotions I had never felt before. I started laughing and crying at the same time.”

Muguira, Romero and Rodriguez have the same core courses at MIT — calculus, biology and chemistry — and they always sit together, right up front, where they can engage with professors.

Rodriguez, who lives off campus with his girlfriend, will invite Romero and Muguira to his apartment so they can study together.

“We’re a team,” Muguira said. “We do our homework together. We get sad for each other when someone gets a lower grade. ... We all come from the same place, and no one can take that away from us. We’re from Miami, we’re from MDC, and we’re Cubans.”

Romero said she, Rodriguez and Muguira — who are all ‘A’ students at MIT so far as they are halfway through their first semester — have explored Boston together.

“It’s a much better experience to go through this journey with people you consider your friends,” Romero said. “It’s like you have three sets of eyes and ears, and you’re aware of everything.”

 **COMMENTS** 