

Uniquely Us: Miami's Cuban Influence

Get Started

Cubans & Miami: A shared tale of time and success

The 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 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 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.

— *Jeff Zbar*

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Name:

Eduardo Padrón

Title:

President, Miami Dade College

Like many Cuban immigrants, Eduardo Padrón has much to be thankful for: a welcoming community, people who share common beliefs, and accomplishing the American dream.

It didn't seem that way the night before his departure from Cuba in July 1961. Eduardo, then 16, and his younger brother, Ernesto, 13, were told by their parents the evening before their scheduled flight that they would be leaving – alone.

“It was hard for me to sleep that night,” he says. “I thought about all my friends and not being able to say goodbye to anyone.”

When their 5 a.m. flight arrived in Miami, their foster family didn't show. There they were, the last two children from the flight, scared and alone in a new country. By chance, a woman who had been expecting her niece, who wasn't on the flight, recognized the boys. The woman, Rosa, was

a friend of the Padrón family in Cuba, and immediately asked permission to take the boys.

“She said, ‘I’m taking you because I cannot leave you here at the airport,’” he says. “It was one of those things that only happens once in a lifetime.”

The next day, they registered as refugees at the Freedom Tower [*Torre de la Libertad*]. The boys enrolled in public school, and Eduardo was soon working five part-time jobs, including picking fruit and scrubbing toilets, to save money.

Within the year, he was filling out college applications. His dream: an Ivy League education.

“My mother made me promise that, no matter what, I would go to school and go to college,” Padrón says.

He used all his money on Ivy League applications. And they all rejected him.

Undeterred, he enrolled in a new school at the county’s north end, Dade County Junior College, which later became Miami Dade

College. It took three buses to get to the campus.

“They opened their doors to me, they helped me get self-confidence. That was my beginning. That place changed my life,” he says. “For most of my fellow Cubans who came here, Miami Dade College was their saving grace. Most would tell you that, without this college, we would not be where we are today.”

After earning his associate degree, Padrón earned his bachelor’s, master’s and doctorate degrees in economics from the University of Florida. His idea of the American dream was to become very wealthy, so he studied economics. When he finished his Ph.D., Padrón was recruited by the DuPont Co. As he tells it, for six months they recruited and wined and dined him, flying him north to meet the company.

When he returned to share “the great news” with his former professors at Dade Junior, they were not impressed.

“They said, ‘What do you mean you’re going to join the corporate monster? You need to come back here and pay your dues. All the

things we did for you. You need to teach,”
he says. “They gave me a major guilt trip.”

It worked. Three weeks later, he politely declined DuPont’s offer and committed to teach for one year.

“Four months into teaching, I found my calling and it became a religion,” he says.

In 1995, he was named president of the school that’s the alma mater to some 2 million students, including some of Miami’s most successful entrepreneurs and Cuban Americans.

“I have no regrets,” he says. “I never became wealthy, but I’m the richest guy you’ll ever meet.”

Padrón also recognizes irony when he sees it. Those Ivy League schools that declined his applications? He’s been awarded honorary doctorates from two: Princeton and Brown. And the Freedom Tower, where he and some 700,000 arrivals registered, is now part of Miami Dade College.

“I have to confess that, every time I go into the Freedom Tower, I get goosebumps,” he says. “Being able to be the steward of that building means the world to me.”

— *Jeff Zbar*

Uniquely Us: Q&As with Cuban CEOs from iconic brands 🔑

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Dec 14, 2018, 6:00am EST

Uniquely Us is a series on the people and sectors defining South Florida. It centers on Miami's Cuban influence and how the exile community helped shape Miami into an international icon.



Eduardo Padrón, president of Miami Dade College.

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