

THE HUMAN COST:

Cubans and Cuban Americans talk about
their lives and the U.S. embargo



LATIN AMERICA WORKING GROUP
EDUCATION FUND



WOLA
WASHINGTON OFFICE
ON LATIN AMERICA

The Author

This report condenses a longer work written by Dr. Mercedes B. Arce Rodríguez, adjunct professor at the 'Colegio de Tlaxcala A.C.' and the 'Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México' in Mexico. Dr. Arce holds a doctorate in psychological science and has a long track record of research on Cuba.

From 1989 to 1992, she was director of the Center for Political Alternatives at the University of Havana; and from 1996 to 2001 she was the Cuba representative of Norwegian's People Aid, the humanitarian aid organization of the Norwegian labor movement.

In her 35 years as an academic, Dr. Arce has been an advisor on many graduate and post-graduate theses, has authored a long list of publications, and participated in numerous research projects including a study of the impact of the "Pedro Pan" airlift that brought Cuban children to the United States in the early 1960s. She has contributed as a researcher, director and script writer on several Cuban documentary films, including "On the other side of the glass," a documentary on the Pedro Pan operation.

The Publishers

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	5
Introduction	6
Author's note	8
Insecurity and the stress of daily life	
Mercedes, member of the Comprehensive Neighborhood Transformation Workshop of Pogolotti, Havana	10
Medicine importation	
Roberto, pharmaceutical industry official, Cuba	14
No tools for surgery, or medicines to heal	
Dolores, worker and mother in Havana	15
An absurd policy	
Victoria, retired in Miami	19
Bureaucracy	
Norberto, Cuban intellectual	21
The industry of illegality	
Juan (pseudonym), business administrator in Cuba	26
Tolerance	
Leandro, resident in Miami	28
Waiting for "that equipment"	
Olivia, Noelia, and Deisi in La Lisa, Havana	33
Travel without restrictions	
Ileana Casanova, teacher in Miami	36
Defending the planet	
Irania, director of the Urban Waste Collection Center in Guantánamo	39
Afterword	
Albeit inhumane, the blockade stands	43
Appendix	
Origins of the blockade/embargo	44
Bibliography	47



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I am thankful to the Group for the Integral Development of the Capital (GDIC in Spanish) and its representative Miguel Coyula, to the Pogolotti Comprehensive Neighborhood Workshop, and to other Cubans such as Mérida, Mayra, Lisi, and Nancy, who agreed to help us, even though, because of U.S. sanctions, we were unable to offer them any financial compensation.

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I am grateful to those who shared their stories. Unfortunately, it was not possible to incorporate all of the interesting stories that I heard into this report. I hope that those stories may eventually be the subject of a future work.

Mercedes Arce Rodríguez
January 2011



INTRODUCTION

Most of the debate about the U.S. embargo on Cuba focuses on foreign policy considerations: What can be done to strengthen human rights and democracy in Cuba? Should the United States be trying to promote change in Cuba? If so, are unilateral sanctions the best way to do so? What are the costs and benefits for the United States of a sanctions policy on Cuba? Would engagement be a more effective approach?

This report is a condensed version of a longer work by Dr. Mercedes Arce Rodríguez. It translates this policy debate into a human lexicon. In the stories told by Cubans on the island, Cubans living in the United States, and Cuban Americans, we hear what the U.S. embargo means for their daily lives. Some of the stories are painful tales of family separation, or tragic accounts of children denied access to medicine. Some reflect the psychological hardships and insecurity that many Cubans feel. Some recount the frustration people feel with the U.S. government, with the Cuban government, and with the bureaucratic red tape involved in overcoming the barriers between the two countries.

Those who are interviewed have a wide range of political views—there are Cubans who criticize their government and Cuban Americans who criticize their community represented here. The voices we hear in the interviews are individuals, with their own views, their own quirks, and their own humanity. In fact, one of the strengths of this report is the window it opens on the daily experiences of both Cubans and Cuban Americans. All of the stories in this report are deeply personal and show us the human suffering and pain caused by the U.S. embargo.

The foreign policy debate is, of course, real and important. We are participants in that debate; in our judgment, U.S. policy toward Cuba neither serves real U.S. interests nor benefits the Cuban people. It ought to be changed.¹ This report reminds us that the debate is not about abstractions—human beings and their daily lives are what are really at stake.

It is perhaps this sense of the U.S. embargo's human cost that makes the policy debate so passionate. The awareness of the human cost spurs on the 187 nations that voted to condemn the U.S. embargo in the U.N. General Assembly in October of 2010—for the 19th consecutive year. It motivates the human rights organizations that call for an end to across-the-board U.S. sanctions. (Organizations such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and Freedom House have expressed strong concerns about human rights in Cuba while also calling for an end to the U.S. embargo.) And it drives the Cuban Americans and others in the United States who increasingly call for an end to the policy. (Fifty-seven percent² of Americans oppose the embargo on the island. Fifty-five percent³ of Cuban Americans oppose continuing the embargo.)

There are, of course, other reasons to call for an end to the U.S. embargo on Cuba. Cuba has much to offer the United States—in medicine and scientific research, in culture and education, in environmental sustainability, in disaster preparedness, in natural beauty—that we deny ourselves because of our embargo policy. Cuba offers business and trade opportunities in agriculture, tourism, bio-technology and other fields, which could benefit U.S. citizens.

¹Center for Democracy in the Americas, the Latin America Working Group, the Lexington Institute, the New America Foundation and the Washington Office on Latin America, *Change in Our Interest: Travel, Trade and Improved Relations with Cuba*, (2009), www.wola.org.

²Washington Post - ABC News poll conducted by telephone April 21-24, 2009.

³Institute for Public Opinion Research of Florida International University conducted on December 1, 2008.



At its heart, though, the argument is a human one. As Dr. Arce shows us, Cubans, Cuban Americans, and others are paying a heavy human cost to maintain a failed policy.

As the report notes, early in his administration President Obama fulfilled his campaign promise and ended perhaps the most egregious and painful aspect of the policy—the restrictions on Cuban-American family travel. While Congress debated legislation during much of 2009 and 2010 to end the ban on U.S. citizen travel to Cuba, neither chamber was able to pass legislation. After the 2010 elections when Republicans took control of the House, prospects of moving legislation through the Congress were greatly reduced.

In a welcome move, however, the President issued an executive directive easing restrictions on U.S. citizen travel to Cuba in January of 2011. The changes, which were implemented by the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) at the end of April, 2011, significantly ease restrictions on travel to Cuba for educational and religious purposes. They also permit "people-to-people" travel, allowing licensed groups to travel to Cuba for interchange with the Cuban people. The President's policy change is similar to the people-to-people travel authorized by President Clinton in the late 1990s, a move later reversed by the Bush Administration in 2003.

Nonetheless, much more needs to be done to dismantle the embargo and replace it with a more humane policy that is based on engagement, ends all travel restrictions, allows trade, and opens valuable political dialogue.

The embargo will not be dismantled overnight. But the United States should move forward on policy changes that lower barriers, restore contact, and open up channels for meaningful dialogue between the governments and citizens alike. This would put the United States on a more humane and sensible course in its relations with Cuba.

Geoff Thale, Washington Office on Latin America

Mavis Anderson, Latin America Working Group Education Found

AUTHOR'S NOTE

"There are now only three manufacturers of Positron Emission Tomography/Computerized Tomography machines in the world: General Electric, Phillips, and Siemens. These companies manufacture [PET/CT scanners] in the United States, using North American technology. Under no circumstances are they allowed to distribute these machines in Cuba, due to the restrictions imposed by the commercial blockade against the island, even when such human and precious things as health and quality of life hang in the balance."

www.trabajadores.cu, October 7, 2008

Stories like this one, taken from the web page of the "Trabajadores" newspaper from Cuba, are commonplace. They appear not only in the Cuban press, but in the international media. These stories underscore the fact that the greatest impact of the embargo falls upon the population of the island as a whole, rather than on its political leadership. As Elia, one of the women interviewed for the book, declared:

"They want to hurt [the leadership] but we are the ones that suffer the consequences."

More than 45 years ago the Kennedy administration imposed economic restrictions on Cuba. Subsequently, four Democratic and five Republican administrations—including Barack Obama's—have re-affirmed those sanctions. Today, the embargo continues to systematically, persistently, and progressively inflict serious damage on Cuban citizens.

The majority of members of the United Nations have acknowledged this reality. In 1992, in the 48th session of the General Assembly of the U.N., the U.N. Secretary General submitted the first of a series of annual reports on the need to end the U.S. blockade against Cuba. Since then, majorities in the United Nations General Assembly have repeatedly voted to express their opposition to the economic restrictions imposed by the United States on Cuba.

Most of the U.N. reports have focused on the economic, commercial, and financial aspects of the blockade. Because of this focus on macro-economic issues, the human effects of this policy on Cuban families living both on the island and within the United States have often been obscured. The goal of this research was, thus, to concentrate on the impacts of the blockade on "Cubanos de a pie" or ordinary Cuban people. They are the little-noticed individuals whose daily lives are affected by a policy that is intended to undermine the Cuban system of government, a policy conceived with little thought to the negative impact it would have on family relationships and on the health and well-being of Cubans living on the island and abroad.

The interviews presented here reflect these inhumane aspects of the embargo. The testimonies present the anguish of many families on both sides of the Florida Straits, who could not, until recently, visit their close relatives or the friends who have been like family to them.

They highlight the situations of boys and girls on long waiting lists for surgeries, their lives depending on a piece of equipment that is only produced in the United States.

They recount the challenges facing hospital patients, awaiting medicines that cannot be obtained in Cuban pharmacies, and who thus must depend on informal networks of friends from abroad. They call attention to the plight of the grandfather who wants to attend the 15th birthday party of his granddaughter in Miami and does not receive a visa from the United States because he "is not currently, nor will he become, a political exile."



The testimonies include as well the views of Cuban Americans who felt the injustice of the restrictions in place from 2004 through 2009 that limited their travel to the island to once every three years. Happily, this restriction was recently lifted by the Obama Administration. But many people endured a painful break in their family ties and their cultural roots. As the testimonies show, these individuals, from widely varying political positions, now call for an end to all such invasive policies that affect their individual freedoms.

This book is the result of 52 in-depth interviews carried out in Cuba and in Miami in July, August, and October of 2008. From these interviews I extracted selected anecdotes, trying not to repeat stories but to capture the range of experiences. I tried to collect commentary from different generations around this issue. This work was not written to be a judgment on policy, but rather a human story that springs from the testimonies I heard. The interviews allowed me to meet people who are heroes of daily life on both sides, people who are rarely recognized by governments, people who are too often seen only as demographic groups, or as the “masses,” but who, despite feeling that they are sometimes trapped and powerless, are the bedrock of their nations.

Mercedes Arce Rodríguez
Mexico City

A NOTE ABOUT TERMINOLOGY

It's important to mention that there is an ongoing disagreement between the United States and Cuba with respect to the term “embargo.” The Cuban government views U.S.-imposed economic restrictions as hostile acts. It argues that the restrictions amount to “acts of war” and it notes that under international law, since the 1909 London Naval Conference, this type of an act of war is termed a blockade. In support of its view, it notes that the U.S. Trading with the Enemy Act, whose authority the President used to implement broad economic restrictions against Cuba in 1962, gives the President of the United States the power to impose emergency economic measures during times of war or when there exists a threat to U.S. national security interests. For these reasons, in all official Cuban documents we will find the term “blockade.” In U.S. documents we see the “embargo,” a term less fraught with political weight. This book uses the two terms interchangeably, keeping consistent with the phrases used by the interview subjects.

INSECURITY AND THE STRESS OF DAILY LIFE



Mercedes, 51 years old, activist in the Comprehensive Neighborhood Transformation Workshop Pogolotti, Havana.

“...I always speak my mind, no matter where I am.”

Mercedes lives in the Pogolotti neighborhood. She is a big talker and “Cuban, 100%.” She supports the Revolution (at one point she was a teacher of classes on Marxism and philosophy). Our conversation touches on all of the ways that the embargo impacts daily life, and how it interacts with the problems of the Cuban economy and Cuban society. When I asked Mercedes about the blockade, she talks first of all about the psychological impact.

“Beyond all of the consequences that these laws, especially Helms-Burton, have for the country, they also create this great sense of insecurity. We think to ourselves ‘What might happen someday?’ Maybe it won’t happen, but we should at least be [aware of the possibility], nobody knows what this life holds for us. For example, my family, my late mother and I have always been careful to save the rental documents for our home. I have them right here, and I can show them to you if you want to take a picture.

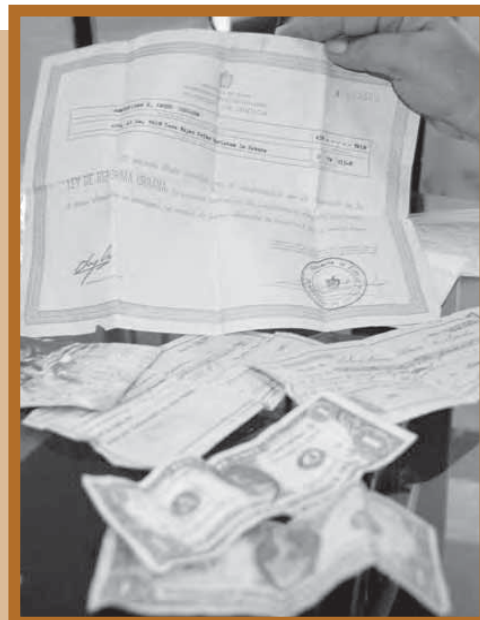
“The [pre-revolutionary] owner of my house is still alive, his name is Rubí. A few years ago one of his children came and visited the houses; he has two. Rubí lived in the house next door and he rented this one out where I now live with my family. Because of all the pressure that Cuba is under right now, we have to ask ourselves: ‘What if they come back one day and want their old properties back?’ That’s why I have the rental documents for the house. If Rubí comes one day, or if a relative of his comes, they will have to compensate me for the house, because I have been maintaining it and I have made some improvements: I added two rooms, I changed the bathroom and the kitchen; it’s a much different house than when Rubí left. So I save the receipts that show we have paid for the house and everything, and he would surely have to compensate us if he came back.

“All this creates a feeling of insecurity for many people. Some people ask themselves ‘Well, what about my house?’ Others say ‘What if they come back? What if they take the house away? Mr. So-and-So used to live there, and he was from a rich family....’ Others say ‘Nobody is going to take this away from me; they will have to kill me to get me out of here.’ That’s the truth; there has been a big psychological impact and people are very stressed.

“People talk, and find things out. They say: ‘Who used to live there?’ There are some people who were given houses here, or traded houses and ended up here for some other reason and they always start by asking around. There are buildings here that have been built where factories used to be, or where there used to be movie theaters, and people say to themselves: ‘Even if the factory owner or theater owner comes, I’m not going to let anyone kick me out’

“In fact, one strategy that all of us have been using, and not just in this neighborhood either, is to go to the property registry. If you look at the old property documents in Cuba, you can see the names of the old owners, and the old streets. So you go down and register your property under your own name, and what do you get? You get the deed for your own home.

“When the Revolution triumphed, the Urban Reform Law was passed to take care of all of that: you became the owner. But if you go down to the property registry, for example to look at the listing for my house, you would see that Rubí is the owner, and you see the address from back then. I fear that those old listings could give them the right to come and take their properties back. That’s why I am doing all this work to bring things up to date, to register my property and prove that it now belongs to me.”



Mercedes, through a patchwork of anecdotes, tells us her story in friendly tones, making us laugh on several occasions. She tells the story of her life in the neighborhood and though it may seem that it doesn't have anything to do with the blockade, she also tells us how the situation of shortages and differences between those who have nothing and those who receive money from a family member—such as her niece who married a foreigner—or those who have family abroad and receive remittances, provokes mixed feelings and reservations, and casts a political shadow on daily life. Mercedes feels that all of these situations are consequences of the ongoing feud between the two countries, and are a result of how the blockade has conditioned the mindset of people who live both in Cuba and in the United States.

War Dollars

“I have two dollars saved away; I saved them from when we switched currencies. When it was all happening I said to myself ‘I’d better save these, because nobody knows what might happen... The dollar is a sort of international currency, I could probably use it anywhere, maybe it might lose some value, but it’s still something.’ Even if it’s just enough for a little bit of sugar, I could still get something for my family, so I have those dollars saved away.

“And I almost cashed them in! I was behind on some payments, but my niece stopped me. She saw them and said ‘Don’t trade them in, don’t trade them in!’ Then she gave me 100 pesos to make the payments.

“It’s true,” Mercedes said, “that the Helms-Burton Act has made us all worried. People who are over there worry too, wondering what might happen to their families back here.”

The Economy And The “Special Period”

The effects of the economic blockade are present in the daily lives of the women of Pogolotti. Mercedes spoke about the lack of basic products that could otherwise be bought directly in the United States, but here must be brought in from much further away and as a result often take a long time to arrive, or don't arrive at all. Asked about a recent comparison between the lives of Cuban women and the lives of women in Europe, Mercedes responded:

“I thought, ‘Don’t compare me to European women who have lived their lives under a totally different set of conditions! Do you know what I mean? European women aren’t stressed out... They don’t ask themselves ‘Did the spaghetti make it to the store? Do I have the tomato sauce? Hallelujah!’ Here, maybe we have the sauce, but not the spaghetti.”

“Don’t compare me to European women; compare me to the rest of the women of Latin America. After all, we have to be objective here. How do Cuban women live? We’re stressed! I may have this, but not the other thing, and when I wake up it’s always ‘What will there be to cook today?’ We have lived this way all our lives.”

“European women didn’t have to lose any sleep to get a stroller and a cradle. That’s what I’m telling you, of course we’ve got that working spirit, but we live here under stress.”

“European women didn’t have to sew their own underwear and socks, they never had to make noodles into rice, or grapefruits into steak, or ground plantain peels! They didn’t have to do all that, but we sure did.”

Mercedes remembers the difficult moments in her life during the so-called “Special Period” after the fall of the Berlin Wall, when the country was plunged into a very difficult economic situation and the U.S. intensified its economic blockade policy. It’s worth it to hear her voice from Pogolotti. Mercedes believes that this period is the clearest example of the effects of the blockade on the economy and family life, with special consequences for Cuban women.⁴

“I was working in Batabanó, as a teacher. I used to get up at four in the morning to go there, during the height of the Special Period. In the beginning I traveled by train, and I would get back here by midnight or one in the morning. I had a young child then, and my mother was taking care of him for me while I was gone. I asked to resign from that job, but they didn’t want to let me go. I had to go through a lot of trouble to work in Batabanó! I had to go, come back, do laundry, take care of my son, and go again....”

⁴ In the early eighties the likelihood of military aggression against Cuba rose notably, as the extreme right came into power in the United States. Around the same time, the leaders of the USSR surprised Cuban authorities by telling them that they would not come to their aid in the case of a military blockade, bombings, or land invasion of the island. This stage of extreme circumstances was called the “Special Period in Wartime” in the corresponding plans that were made at the time.

When in 1989 the Cuban leadership foresaw the difficult future, they reached the conclusion that it would be in many ways similar to the stage that the country had to go through without help against a possible military aggression from the principal world power. For that reason the great economic difficulties that were confronted were then called the “Special Period in Peacetime.” Cuban leader Fidel Castro explained the situation in January, 1990: “What does the special period in peacetime mean? That the problems could have been so serious in the economic sphere due to relations with the countries of Eastern Europe or could have been so grave due to certain factors or processes in the Soviet Union that our country would have had to confront an exceedingly difficult supply situation. Take into account that all of the fuel comes from the USSR, and/or what could be, for example, a reduction down to half supply due to the difficulties in the USSR, or even a reduction to zero, which would thus be equivalent to a situation like the one we call special period in wartime. It would not, of course, be as grave in peacetime as there would be certain possibilities for export and imports....”

A few months later, that situation had become a reality, and it continues to severely impact the Cuban people.

“We Cuban women have been through a lot, man, a lot, and it hasn't been easy!

“European culture is different, I think. Life conditions are different. Over there people probably use shower gel and body oils, and here I have to wonder each morning where I will get soap to bathe with. And if I end up with some money to buy something, I have to make it stretch and make it last.

She also spoke about the consequences of what she called the ‘internal blockade,’ saying that the U.S. policy toward the island has turned into a sort of justification to be able to chalk up pre-existing problems to this policy that is senseless and has gone on for far too long.

“The worst thing we did was to follow the example of the Soviet Union, that was just the worst, because it set us way back. If we had developed on our own from the beginning, and hadn't depended so much on the [Soviet trading bloc] Comecon....”⁵

Our interview subject reflects upon the situation created by so many years of blockade, fearful of the hopelessness it creates, especially in young people. Maybe her voice should be heard along with other ordinary Cubans when considerations about the complexity and difficulty of daily life raise topics that are still rarely debated publicly in Cuba. My last question to her was a natural reaction to the rawness of her testimony.

What do you see for the future?

There was a long silence, and I asked her if she could say just one word to describe her feelings. She answered without hesitation:

“Uncertainty, fear.”



⁵ Council for Mutual Economic Assistance. This was an economic support organization that existed from 1949 to 1991, formed around the Soviet Union by countries of so-called real socialism, with the objective of promoting trade relations between member states.

MEDICINE IMPORTATION

Roberto, Cuban pharmaceutical industry official.

“If they think the medicine is for Cuba, they simply don’t sell.”

Roberto works at EMSUME, the Cuban state medicine distribution and marketing company. He very nicely agreed to our interview request, though he had only a few minutes to spare from his heavy work schedule that day.

With a modest smile he explains that the Cuban government has managed, despite the blockade, to produce 525 different medicines to satisfy the national demand. 221 of these drugs are produced for hospital use, and 304 are for sale in pharmacies throughout the country. But, he says, there are 303 kinds of medicine that they need to import, and a portion of those are only produced in laboratories in the United States. The blockade makes it very hard to acquire them.⁶

Please describe the problems you encounter.

“Well, we talk a lot about the effects of that blockade policy, and the everyday Cuban on the street sometimes could think that it’s not as bad as we make it out. But it causes me real headaches.



“Our company has to guarantee the production of specific medicines to cover the basic pharmaceutical needs of the country; but it’s often difficult, because prices sometimes quadruple or quintuple while we are trying to bargain for them. The suppliers have the upper hand. And we have to find third countries to do business through, for the products that the Americans make. Often, if they think the medicine is for Cuba, they simply don’t sell. The laboratories would receive fines for [unauthorized] sales to Cuba, and of course they don’t want to lose money, so they just don’t sell the medicines.

“I personally have had to travel great distances to get raw materials, and even then, many times they don’t arrive on time. That sets back production and medicines take longer to get to the hospitals and pharmacies.”

⁶ Until the year 2000, U.S. companies and their foreign subsidiaries could not sell medicine or medical equipment and supplies to Cuba without a special license available only under very restrictive conditions. Since U.S.-owned multi-nationals dominate the pharmaceutical industry, it was very difficult for Cuba to purchase medical goods on the international market. While an exception to the trade embargo approved in 2000 made it easier for U.S. companies to sell medical supplies, licensing and other related restrictions have discouraged most U.S. companies from entering the Cuban market. In a 2009 report titled “U.S. Embargo Against Cuba: Its Impact on Economic and Social Rights,” Amnesty International says that, because of continuing U.S. restrictions, the “export of medicines and medical equipment continues to be severely limited (15).” Some drugs and medical supplies are simply unavailable to Cuba. For others, Cuba pays premium prices to those non-U.S. suppliers who will sell, and thus can buy less with its health care expenditures.

NO TOOLS FOR SURGERY OR MEDICINES TO HEAL

Dolores, worker and mother.

“... and the sodium valproate never arrived.”



Dolores is a common name on the island. People used to consult the saints' calendar to name their newborn children, and that's the case for this thin woman with large, tired-looking but shining eyes.


We wanted to hear the story of Dolores' son, which had been mentioned by a neighbor. Dolores and her son have a modest home: a small living room with old wooden furniture and a new refrigerator, installed during the “Energy Revolution” in 2004, when old, energy-wasting appliances were replaced with new ones. Dolores' son sits with us. He is tall and wears dark glasses, and though his manners suggest some intellectual impairment, he watches us and at times interrupts Dolores to remind her of certain details in the story.

Please tell me about yourself and about the specific case of your son... What is his name?

“His name is Brian Vasconcelos.”

Your neighbors told me that you are an example of how the U.S. blockade has directly affected Cuban families.

“Well, you could say that. When the child was born, he had problems—seizures—well, I didn't know what it was at the time.



“He was born in 1992 and his medical problems started in 1993. That’s when this medicine tragedy started; he was about to turn one. First it was with the phenobarbital that I could never find; his seizures were under control in the beginning, but about a month later he stopped taking it because we ran out, and the problems began again.

“I tried to get the medicines, even though I didn’t know what he had. I didn’t know what kind of disease it was. They told me it was a hemiplegia that caused retardation and that there was a medicine for it, flunarizine, and that he needed other drugs for his disease.

“In the hospital, they brought me a few boxes, and that was fine; he had seizures, but only a few. Then I ran out of pills and we couldn’t get anymore.”

What was going on?

“What they told me [at the Ministry of Public Health] was that because of the blockade, the medicines weren’t coming in, or they didn’t arrive on time. There was a time when my child went for a month without taking the medicine. He lost the ability to walk during that time, his feet hunched in and they had to operate on his leg. It was terrible!

“Then, medicine started to arrive, I would find it in the pharmacies, or the hospital also would help me sometimes; sometimes I could buy it through MediCuba.⁷ It was expensive and I didn’t have much money, only enough to buy the medicines.”

She tells us how, during the hard years of the Special Period [the years of severe economic difficulties in Cuba after the end of Soviet assistance], she couldn’t find the medicine; it was no longer available because the Cuban government couldn’t buy it fast enough due to blockade restrictions. She explains that she is thankful to her foreign friends.

“I worked in a public health school. There were some Spaniards doing an internship there and they heard about my child’s case. When they went back to their country, they looked for the medicines and couldn’t find them; they talked to another Spaniard, who lived in the United States. He wrote to me at my job, and sometimes he was able to send me what I needed. When I told him that I couldn’t find it here, he would send me four or five boxes, and that got me through until the drugs were available through the public health system here.

“Afterwards, in 2000, we explained my son’s case to a Belgian woman that my niece knew; and she started to send medicine, too.

“Now they’ve changed his medicine to topiramate, and we depend on the hospital. It’s new, and it’s working, which is good because he had been taking the other medicine for so long that it didn’t have an effect anymore. Because of the blockade, we still have problems getting sodium valproate, which also comes from the hospital. That’s why he stopped taking it; he is taking other medicines until the valproate comes in.

“They’re all imported, and that’s the problem. They get to the hospital, but there are so many children that need them, that they only give a little bit to each person; it’s better than nothing, though. This month the medicines didn’t come in. I don’t know what the problem is, but we’re still waiting. They always say that medicines don’t come in because of the blockade.”

⁷ Medicine importation company of the Ministry of Public Health.



Dolores explains that the problems aren't just with medical supplies.

“What really gets me are his boots; they’re not available in stores either. Look at the ones he has now. There is no glue to fix them, and these are the same support pieces he’s had since we first had them made. We have to switch them from one boot to the other... like this... and see, these are all separate pieces, because there just aren’t orthopedic shoes here. Look at the ones he’s got! Sometimes we have to go out and I have him put these on anyway, because we don’t have anything else. That’s what gets me, the problem with the medicine, and the problem with his shoes.”

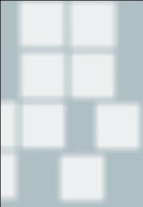
When I asked about the causes of the shortage of medicines and orthopedic shoes, Dolores told me that the Cuban Association of Mentally and Physically Disabled and Impaired Persons [ACLIFIM by its Spanish acronym] has explained to her that the company in charge of making this kind of footwear has limited production capacity; and there is a high demand, as well as a lack of resources because many of the parts are imported, and some of the suppliers have relations with the United States and cannot sell directly to Cuba.

Dolores explains that she stays at home, taking care of her special needs son, and that the State pays her a salary. Dolores studied architecture and worked up until 2007, when her child began to have further neurological complications that continue to keep him from going to school. For that reason, she is included in the “Mother Protector Plan,” which pays her a salary while she takes care of her child. With a contagious smile, and in part motivated by our surprise at Brian’s beautiful green eyes, she says proudly:



“I stopped working because I have to take care of my son, and that's a job that I love. I've gone through a lot with this child, so you know, and it's not just the medicine; but when he was young I had to scramble just to get CT scans and MRIs. I would ask everywhere for help, and luckily I was working at a public health school and got some help that way; but what has really made the difference has been solidarity among friends. It's thanks to those two people I mentioned, and a few others, that we have been able to make it.”

Dolores proudly describes how all these people abroad have turned into very good friends. She owes it to them that she has been able to get around and “outwit” the blockade over all these years and help her son be able to walk, even if with some difficulty; but at least he is not in a wheelchair.



Even though Brian is now receiving medicines produced in Cuba, all of these good friends stay in touch and in solidarity.

“I don’t know, in solidarity they continue to help me. They say that every time they go by a pharmacy they make sure to buy the medicine. In fact, one of them bought some of the old medicine for me last time, the kind that Brian no longer takes, and he sent it down. I am going to donate it to the hospital so they can give it to another child that needs it since Brian doesn’t take flunarizine anymore.

“Hopefully one day they will end the blockade, and I won’t have to bother my friends asking for medicines. They should still come visit, but just to have fun, right?”

AN ABSURD POLICY

Victoria, retired in Miami.

“It’s the country where I was born, where I grew up. I hope to die there someday.”

“In 1961 I was arrested, together with two of my brothers, because one brother had a print shop and we were printing propaganda for the *Movimiento Revolucionario del Pueblo* (*People’s Revolutionary Movement*), a counter-revolutionary organization funded by Manuel Ray Rivero. I served five years in prison; my brother served four. My older brother, the owner of the print shop, was sentenced to 20 years in prison, and he served nine. It caused a lot of suffering for my parents and my family.

“I returned to the neighborhood five years later and [at first] I couldn’t find a job.

“I began to sew for the dancers of the Alicia Alonso Ballet, and I did it for a year and a half. Then I got another job. After four years working there, because I was such a hard worker, they wanted to make me a youth militant; they didn’t know anything about my past. I had a big argument with the local Party leader, and a week later he found out that I had been in jail, and he fired me. After that, I began to work in the Ministry of Construction, which by then was a place where many ex-prisoners were working. I worked at the planning department there, and I ended up as the planner for school construction in the city of Havana. I worked from 1971 to 1979, when Fidel decided that everybody who had been in prison should leave Cuba; so I left [in the Mariel boatlift]. I buried my mother and father here in this country, along with my brother. I’m retired now, and I am raising a great-nephew, the child of a young couple.”

Victoria is a Cuban, and regardless of her story as a dissident and her condition as a political exile, she catalogues the blockade policy as “absurd.” She is a woman profoundly changed by her life in Miami; she is a principled Cuban who detests the political machinery orchestrated from this city against the Cuban government. She stated:

“None of them has any family in Cuba, and if they did....


“There was a Spanish-language radio program here; the commentator said one day on his program that his mother had died in Cuba and that he hadn’t sent her anything, not even a bottle of aspirin. That was the only time I have ever called into a radio show. I called and asked him:

‘Tomás, is what you are saying true?’

‘Of course it’s true,’ he told me.

‘Then you don’t have a mother!’ I told him.





“Later I found out from his family that he had been sending medicine to his mother, but he wanted to seem like a real hard-liner... These incredible hard-liners that still support this absurd policy! They support the policy to get recognition, because they think that time stopped in 1959; they don’t know anything about Cuba. They have never returned; they are unaware of reality, of how people feel there. They want to maintain the anti-Castro industry, and once that is over, I don’t know how they are going to make a living; there are many people that make a living like that.

“I think it’s just an absurd policy; what’s more, I don’t believe in the blockade. The blockade is a government-to-government confrontation, and that just doesn’t make sense.”

“We need changes here and changes there. Let there be more life for Cubans, so that they don’t have to be wondering 24 hours a day what they will have to cook with... That’s what’s been happening all these years.

“I’m telling you, I don’t blame the American government so much as the Cuban exiles who proposed, supported, and passed these policies. These policies are the product of a group of Cubans in exile that has injected its ideas into each new administration.”

Do you think that there is a majority in Miami now that rejects the blockade policy?

“No, maybe not a majority, but it has changed a lot. As my friend María Cristina would say, the ‘historic and hysteric’ exile community is shrinking every day. We have to remember that 125,000 Cubans came through the Mariel boatlift, but each year 20,000 more Cubans come legally, with visas. They are from new generations; they have other mindsets, and they want to see a change for their families and their country. I think that at least they think more about [the good of] their families. I would say that the new arrivals are no longer exiles; exiles are those who came for political reasons, to escape the Cuban government. People coming now openly say that they are economic immigrants. It hurts, but that’s the way it is.

“They come with high expectations, and the situation here has changed a lot. It’s harder for them to fit in; the majority of them are academically very well prepared, but they run into the language barrier that is so difficult here. Many still have the will to sacrifice, but many are disappointed; they simply consider themselves immigrants. They are not interested in politics.

“There are people here who are very important and very well trained, and I think that over time they will make changes. We don’t want to go back to the past; we just want a place to live. Cuba is a very young country that has a lot to do, and we have some good things. Our high level of education and Cuban inventiveness will help us greatly.

“I want to see these positive changes for everybody, and I want it to be known that there are Cubans here and Cubans there; we are all the same and we all want the best for our country. Cuba is the country where I was born, where I grew up, where it’s all different: the air, the sky, the streets—they may be full of potholes, but they are my streets.”

BUREAUCRACY



Norberto, Cuban intellectual.

“Family and life itself are stronger bonds.”

“This is the first time I’m going to speak about this, because these are very personal issues for me. I came to Cuba with my mother in 1959; she was Cuban, from Manzanillo, but I was born in Caracas, Venezuela. When my parents got divorced—divorces in Latino culture often produce shockwaves—my mother decided to put some space, or in this case water, between her and my father; and we came back to her home country where her family had been involved in the triumph of the revolution.”

Norberto recounts how his mother’s family supported the overthrow of Batista, but when they saw the process of radicalization in the Cuban Revolution most of them decided to leave the country.

“Imagine it, a small family from eastern Cuba, everyone left the country until only my mother and my aunt were left. In the '70s she and my aunt got authorization to go. I had just turned 18, and I stayed and ended up living alone.

“I had been a youth militant in secondary school and pre-university courses in Vedado. But when my mother left, I quit the youth league, I quit school and I went to work; I was 18 years old! I still kept in touch with my mother, but I decided to stay in Cuba.

“Legally, I was a Venezuelan citizen, but I had the right to Cuban citizenship through my mother. It was a bureaucratic labyrinth. It’s all a bit surreal, and I’ve always said that our experience of tropical socialism would even send Kafka away sucking his thumb. There are so many contradictions. I became a Cuban citizen in 1979.

“Starting in 1979, as a part of the new dialogue with the Cuban community abroad, my mother began to travel back to Cuba. She came eight times from 1979 up to 1997, which was the last time she would come visit, as she was quite sick by then. She became an American citizen and got a job as a nurse, and then didn’t have the money to travel too much. Also, in 1985 the [U.S. government] cut back the trips and that’s why she didn’t come more regularly.

“In the ‘90s I had the opportunity, through my job, to visit the United States, and I ended up going five times between 1995 and 2001.

“I never had problems with the visa; I participated in three congresses of the Latin American Studies Association, twice as a speaker and once as a guest. I even spent two months in the United States once, and I was able to stop in New York and spend time with my mother. Through my job I was able to be in contact with my mother in her final stages—she was very old; she was born in 1915.”

Norberto told us that his mother lived alone in Queens, New York. She was very independent and lived a very organized life, and was happy to be able to periodically see her son who lived in Cuba.

“In 1995 I went there for the first time, and I had about a month in New York. As I said, my mother was going to turn 80; we saw each other several times that trip, and I think it was also a relief for her. In 2003 I was supposed to go for the sixth time to participate in the LASA⁸ conference that was going to be held in Dallas in the spring of 2003. That year was the first significant cut in the participation of Cuban academics in events in the United States. That is, they gave out visas to around 60 people, but 20 of us were also denied. It was very random. I remember that of the twelve of us that applied through the Union of Writers and Artists, ten of us had our visas denied, and yet one person who was a well-known figure and party militant was approved. The fact that I wasn’t allowed to go that time—the stamp on my application said ‘possible terrorist’—had other direct effects on my family life.

“Look, I was supposed to go to the United States in 2003, I was going to visit my mother in New York. Even though hindsight isn’t always such a useful thing, I think that visit could well have been the last lucid moments she could have shared with me. In May of that same year I found out through a Cuban friend who lives in Long Island, that some of my mother’s neighbors had taken her to a psychiatric hospital because she was suffering badly from Alzheimer’s disease. She turned 88 that year, in November.

“We immediately began to make arrangements to keep the apartment in case she had to return for any of her belongings, or if I went to visit in the future, or if I needed to put her in an assisted living home. Some Cuban friends in the United States helped me with that... but she spent a month in the psychiatric ward.

“During that Spring in 2003, there was a law passed in the healthcare system, I don’t know if it was for the entire United States or just in New York: no extra-official information was allowed to be given out about patients; it had to come from the hospital, and was only given to certain authorized family members or hospital staff... it had to be totally official. We ended up having the psychiatric ward where she was admitted make a certified legal medical document notarized by the State of New York, and we also got a document from the authorities at the assisted living home.

⁸ Latin American Studies Association.

“When I got the documents, a Mexican diplomat friend of mine who was helping me get access to the U.S. Interests Section –as this was a totally personal and humanitarian case–this friend told me that there was some positive precedent, and with a letter from the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Foreign Relations I applied for a humanitarian visa.

“The Ministry of Culture itself contacted the U.S. Interests Section so that I could get a prioritized, humanitarian case hearing. I presented the documents from the assisted living facility where my mother was and from the psychiatric ward where she had been, her birth certificate, the letters from



the Ministries of Culture and Foreign Relations, and they apparently had my file there and saw that I had already traveled five times before. They treated me well enough, and in fact even though they scheduled me for fingerprinting, they then said that I didn't have to go through that step.

“I will never forget; the visa interview was July 14th, 2003: Bastille Day, the birth of the French Republic. My mother had been admitted in May, that is, two months prior, and I was only by then finally able to pull all the paperwork together; it wasn't easy.

“I made the final call in February of 2004... I had requested a visa for a humanitarian case, but they told me that it didn't qualify because my mother wasn't in the terminal stage, and that they were going to process it as a family visa. Even though my mother had been in a psychiatric hospital and then a nursing home, I didn't qualify for a humanitarian case.

“Through some friends, and with money that I had made from some video-conferences, I paid for my mother's apartment; I had to keep it for six months until friends could go and clean out my mother's few papers and belongings. After that, the next LASA congress was going to be held in October, 2004, in Las Vegas, and I hoped that I could get a visa for that, as I hadn't received any response to the humanitarian request. It turned out that 2004 was the year that they denied all the visas for Cuban academics. There were sixty-six of us, and we were all denied. It was my third denial.

“I stayed in contact with my mother through other friends. Friends would go into the hospital and put her on the phone, but by then she wasn't in her right mind any more and telephone communication was nearly impossible. That's how it all went; I never received a response for the family visa or the requested humanitarian visa. In March, 2005, these same friends that had helped my mother told me that she had died.”

Further arrangements followed, as Norberto's mother had wanted to be cremated, and those arrangements, along with her return to Cuba, were possible thanks to the support of a healthy group of friends in the U.S. that raised money; the Cuban Ministry of Foreign Relations waived the charges for repatriation, and her ashes reached Cuba in late 2005.

In trying to reflect on the relationship between his personal story, the situation for Cuban families and the impact of the travel restrictions policies, Norberto returns to issue of the blockade against Cuba. This Cuban intellectual shares his views calmly, cordially, and based on his own experience.

"Look, to be fair and objective, this story is, generally, a story that resonates with all Cuban families because we have been so polarized over the years on issues of emigration and exile.

"To be fair, I should admit that when my cousins left in the '60s and '70s, I was the first one to cut off contact with them. Life has shown me though, undoubtedly, that above ideology and above politics, family and life itself are stronger bonds. I think that Cuban society, the Cuban Revolution and our state institutions have been protagonists in a twisted history of intolerance—I too have been a protagonist in this story, not a victim—for more than 30 years.

"We matured and gained new responsibilities; I worked in the **Gaceta**—the magazine of the Writers and Artists Union—since the end of the '80s, and we turned that paper into a space that has focused on and consolidated global Cuban culture. We have been doing this work for almost 20 years, and the results have been transmitted to the families living on the island. Our institutions have been growing more responsive, though I think they could still stand to be more flexible. Some of the intolerance hasn't left the other shore though, either. Part of our family has felt hurt in exile or hurt by the reactions of their family members who stayed in Cuba, and they haven't been able to return to a dialogue and erase these signs of intolerance.

"I should tell you, I have started to talk again with some of my cousins who are living in the U.S. Others, even though I am willing to reconnect, still don't want contact, and this makes dialogue impossible, because dialogue needs two sides.

"I was a Venezuelan citizen, I could have gone to the United States or to Venezuela, but I can't imagine living anywhere but Vedado, not just Cuba, but specifically the Vedado neighborhood. Beyond any political or ideological readings of it, though, I realized that my mother would never feel at home here again. When she would come to visit, after just one week she would begin to miss her independence, her house, her refrigerator full of food, her way of life.





"I knew that one day I would receive word of the death of my mother, but at least I thought I could go to the United States once a year or every two years. I always had found a way to get there within two months of applying for a visa, to make sure I was able to be there to see my mother as long as she didn't die a sudden death. That had always made me feel better. Well, that was all blown to pieces with the Bush policies toward Cuba. Everything, literally, was blown to pieces.

"The long wait in the U.S. Interests Section, the fact that I received no word from them for months, the fact that my mother was dying, these are bitter, bitter pills to swallow. This is the first time that I talk about it publicly in five years. It was so bitter to swallow that my mother died on March 14, 2005 that I didn't tell even my closest circle of friends, nor my co-workers. They found out through other people, through my wife who let them know about it, but it was all very personal, very intimate for me, and I have kept it that way for all this time.

"Those who know me well in the context of greater Cuban culture know that along with many people of my generation, I too adopted that top-down, revolutionary and militant discourse and judged friends or family members who left Cuba, burning their bridges and family ties; but over time life has taught me that this isn't true."

"Now, with the magazine, the goal is to build this big idea, this model of 'One Cuba' from wherever we are in the world, whether it's from an eastern village, or Madrid, Mexico or New York. Undoubtedly, that idea struck hard, and it is with me still."

The ashes of Norberto's mother reached Cuba nine months after her death. Today, Norberto still says that it weighs heavily on his mind and his heart that, due to bad luck and coincidences, he was not able to be with his mother in her final lucid days.

THE INDUSTRY OF ILLEGALITY



Juan (pseudonym), 60-year-old business administrator in Cuba.

“Behind the blockade there is an industry that profits, worth millions and millions of pesos.”

Juan doesn't want to give his real name, or have his picture taken. After this warning he speaks to us about what he calls the industry of illegality, those who profit by circumventing the blockade.

First, he explains that it is nearly impossible to travel legally to visit the United States; his own visa applications have been denied six times. The requirements for a U.S. visa request are poorly defined, and each successive attempt brings greater economic costs.

“You spend 150 dollars, more or less, easily 200 dollars once you add it all up, and just for them to reject you. In the beginning, for example, I would list my brothers on the form but not my children because, well, they have been in the U.S. for 20 years now; I listed all my property, machinery, a vehicle...They were important things to justify that I wasn't going to stay there. And? Nothing, they roll right over you.

“The last time I went, a woman who was filling out the forms told me:

‘Get yourself a rental contract, make it look like you are renting out a room or your house, so that they see that you have some income.’

“But when I had already given them real proof that I didn't want to stay there, they didn't care then, so what are the real requirements?

“We Cubans ask ourselves, ‘What rules should we follow?’ There are no rules. It's not that [dissidents] are better treated [by the consular officials at the U.S. Interest Section] than Party members. My next-door neighbors are Party members, very organized people, very committed to the Cuban revolutionary process. They went for the 15th birthday party of their daughter, they both got visas to go.

“My mother and father went once, and came back. When my mother applied to go again she was denied because they said she was a possible immigrant. They were elderly people who had a bunch of children. Five of their children are here, though my mother has eight in all; and they were never granted a visa to go again. Other people are approved to go every year; you never know, there are no rules, no real rules.



“What all this leads to is illegality.

“Once you get there, you go and seek protection under the Cuban Adjustment Act, and everybody knows that Cubans get a blank check.⁹ No matter how you get there, whether you had to 'get your feet wet' or not, it's all the same... In Mexico there is even an [entire criminal network to bring Cubans to the U.S.] now. We all heard about what happened with that bus of Cuban immigrants that was going through a checkpoint in Mexico. They killed the police officers, killed everyone [while avoiding a checkpoint as they carried Cubans illegally in Mexico toward the U.S. border].

“There is an industry behind all of this, one worth millions and millions of pesos. We are talking 12,000 dollars to get you out of Cuba on a speedboat; it's all part of the package.”

I asked Juan who he thought was responsible for this situation. He responded:

“You know, I couldn't tell you. This guy Bush has done so many bad things... But I can't say who the author here is, because it's all gone on so long. This is nothing more and nothing less than just another way to make Cubans unhappy. There are some two million Cubans in the United States by now, according to the statistics, though that seems conservative to me and I imagine that there are more than two million of us there now. You know, that's some kind of profit! So I'm not sure who to blame... I know the Cuban problem is the same everywhere, in Spain, Canada, anywhere; Cubans are generating money all over the world, but who knows who it is all for?”

Finally, Juan added:

“[Getting around] the blockade is big business for some, but things will stay the same for us Cubans here. Life will go on....What I want is to live in peace and harmony. Our past in Cuba is the same one as in all the countries of Latin America: drugs, prostitution, and gambling. That was the past in Cuba, and it's not something I want to go back to.”

⁹ U.S. policy is to permit Cubans who reach U.S. territory—whether through a legal port of entry or not—to stay in the country. Under the Cuban Adjustment Act, Cubans resident in the U.S. for a year or more are eligible to become permanent legal residents through an expedited process. There are no quotas on the number of Cubans admitted in this way.

TOLERANCE



Leandro, resident in Miami.

“... really the embargo doesn't affect Fidel or Raúl; or the few on top, it affects the people, the families.”

Leandro arrived in Miami in 1980 through the Mariel boatlift when he was just 16 years old. He is from the generation that was born in the mid '60s in Cuba. Leandro explains the harassment that led him to leave Cuba, and the attachment he still feels to the island. Though President Obama has now made it possible for people like Leandro to freely visit their relatives in Cuba, the embargo that separates Cuba and the U.S. still troubles him.

Leandro's narration of his life lets us understand the great differences between people's experiences and the need for a human understanding of the issues of the blockade and Cuba-United States relations.

“I was 16 years old when I left Cuba in 1980 [as part of the Mariel boatlift]. I faced harassment in school and everywhere for being homosexual.

I had made my choice, and if I didn't leave Cuba then my 'Plan B' was to be sentenced to 4 years in prison for 'endangerment.' My father was a socialist, and he died for socialism. He never belonged to the Party because he was a communist and revolutionary at heart. He said that you didn't need a Party card to be a communist, and there were many people with Party cards who weren't really socialists. He authorized my departure because he knew that family was the most important, and I was his son and he would love me no matter what. He was a great father.”

Did they stage a “meeting of repudiation” when you left Cuba?

“Here's what happened: I had been in school, but I was kicked out for ideological deviation because I, innocently, said in my class that I wanted to have Levi Jeans, and I wanted a pair of Adidas brand shoes. The sons of the Cuban ministers went to my school, people whose families were officials in the Cuban government. The parents of all of my classmates traveled abroad and my friends all had the clothes that I wanted so much. Since they already had them, they didn't talk about them; and since I didn't have them, and said I wanted to, they kicked me out of school.



“They sent me to another school, and that’s where I first saw a ‘meeting of repudiation’. Mariel had just started, and the incident happened at school, toward a boy and a girl whose parents were leaving the country. It was totally unfair! They were up at the podium and people started yelling ‘*Gusanos!*’ ‘Traitors!’ ‘Scum!’ And I saw how everyone ran after them down the street, and they had to run away to avoid being beaten... It was so shameful!

“I think those meetings happened partly because, since for so long in Cuba there hadn’t been real freedom of expression, when a window opened, just a crack, people all participated. They didn’t really object to the fact that their neighbors were leaving, but these meetings of repudiation were a carnival, a chance to express themselves. It’s like here, in Miami, on Calle 8, when they said that Fidel died people came to this restaurant where we are sitting now, they danced outside and partied. When people don’t have that freedom they take advantage of any excuse to express themselves.”

“I remember the day that I left the country. They picked me up in Havana, the government started a ‘raid’ called *Operation Feather* to pick up all of the homosexuals; they picked me up and I had to get all the paperwork, including the authorization from my father.

“The Committees in Defense of the Revolution were in front of the building, downstairs; they had gathered to read the list of the people who were leaving that day. When my name was called people yelled: ‘good riddance, good riddance!’

“When everyone left, after the meeting was over, I went downstairs and I remember that even the President of the Committee and others came up to me, gave me a hug and said:

‘Don’t forget to write to me’

‘Send me a bra’


‘Send me some shampoo’

“The double standard in Cuba is incredible, I hadn’t done anything wrong, I hadn’t hurt anybody and they shouldn’t have called my name in the meetings of repudiation. Sometimes mass mentality can be a horrible thing.”

What was it like when you arrived?

“I’ll just say when I got here from Cuba, through Mariel, I came to Cayo Hueso and I had a bad experience that I’ll share with you. When I got to Cayo Hueso I was 16 and very alone, I had no family. There was a homosexual man, older than I, he must have been around 30, and he approached me. He was almost like an angel, a father, an older brother, and he took care of me. But when we reached land he had to leave. Once we landed they put us on separate buses, and when I got on the bus that would take me to the airport to go to the refugee center there were people on the bus, *Marielitos*, that had watched when that man and I said goodbye. They saw us and realized that we were homosexual, and when I got on the bus, you aren’t going to believe it, they started to beat me! It was an incredible experience.

“I sometimes tell people, when I was a child I remember there was a program in Cuba called *Our Sons*; the program never portrayed someone different, like me. I didn’t know what I was, then. That is, nobody talked about that topic in Cuba. Now, especially because of the AIDS issue, people talk about it openly; moreover, there are now much more tolerant and intelligent positions in Cuba on the issue than those that exist among some Cubans in exile.



"I have been with my partner for ten years, but under the law right now [here in Florida], if he goes into a coma or has an accident, I can't go and say 'take him off the IV, or put him on medication.' I'm nobody when I go and visit him; I'm not a cousin, or a brother, not a husband... There are many people who have that same retrograde mentality from Cuba. We tend to say that it's about communism, but it's really something that is part of the idiosyncrasy of Cubans in general.

"I was born and I grew up in Havana, in the center of Old Havana, in the Jesús María neighborhood. My mother still lives there, 84 years old, and she has lived there since 1957. My father died four years ago.

"I had just gone to Cuba a couple of years before he died. Before Bush was returned to office, I remember that I went; and it looked like Bush might win again. Even though we thought it didn't make any sense, we knew that if he won he was going to continue or tighten restrictions on travel to Cuba; and we wouldn't be able to visit family any more.

"My father thought that if Bush was elected I wouldn't be able to travel again, or not for a long time. He had begun to have some problems with a wart on his nose, and then he ended up with throat cancer. They began to give him radiation treatment, but he died after the first session.

"I couldn't go to Cuba then because of both countries: partly because the new Bush laws didn't allow it; and partly because of the absurd bureaucracy of Cuba. I couldn't get my passport, it was delayed, and there was no law to let me just travel for humanitarian reasons. I can't just say 'my father is dying, let me go for a weekend, we are 30 minutes from Havana!'"

When your father died, did you have any particular memory or emotion at that moment? Did you feel sadness, hate, or resentment?

"No. I'll tell you the truth: what I felt was anger, but beyond just myself, because my father was dead and there was no way to turn that back. I had to move on. I had the urge to fight, though. I signed petitions in Miami some years ago, before my father died, to lift the embargo; I collected thousands of signatures when the campaign started. I felt such an urge to struggle, maybe I am doing it now by voting for Obama. Not for me, not for my own case, but for those who come after me, so they don't have to go through what I went through.

"Also, in part I understand those historic exiles; the people who came in the '60s... Many of them are still hurt, because at the beginning of the Revolution many people died far from their families. They came here and couldn't return until the '80s. Many of them are still hurt, and you hear them sometimes saying 'I couldn't go when I needed to, so why should anyone else?' But I think we always should move toward understanding, toward improvement, toward peace. That is, if the first exiles couldn't return, and if I, 30 years later couldn't either, I would love to see the person after me not have to go through that suffering."

"Why should we continue to repeat the same chain of actions that leads to pain and resentment? I would love to see that change, so that someone in the future, someone younger than me, doesn't have to go through what we went through. I really don't feel that kind of resentment for what happened."

“Everything that has happened over so many years between Cuba and the United States, all this has created and maintained laws of aggression from the U.S. toward Cuba... and vice versa, too. Cuba is always saying ‘we are going to be attacked!’ The extreme right here doesn’t want Fidel to fall because they’ve made their livings for over forty years based on the same Cuba story. And sometimes I wonder if it isn’t in Cuba’s favor, too, to keep the embargo in place, to continue playing out the story of David and Goliath; the poor oppressed island, and in the middle of the sandwich are real people suffering, families separated.

“I only know that to place an embargo on a country to keep it isolated and separate is not the answer and it doesn’t solve anything. It keeps them isolated, it keeps us isolated, and I think that the exchange of ideas, from family to family and Cuban to Cuban, is much better than this continued isolation. It’s more human. Moreover, we have seen that the embargo doesn’t work. Maybe if we had only been doing it for five years and it hadn’t worked that would be one thing, but it’s been fifty years, and it’s time to change it.”



Let’s make a turn in the conversation, because I am interested in the human issues here. If you had to describe your feelings and reflect on the human aspects of this situation, what words and phrases would you use?

“Definitely I would say inhumane, and loveless. I think that love is a force that brings us together. When we raise barriers that separate us, that drives us further apart. It’s like the rings of waves a stone makes when dropped into a river: if the stone is a message of love, then it sends out waves of love. But the same thing happens with hate. I think that has been one result of the embargo: it has driven us apart and not allowed us any contact.

“The travel restrictions to Cuba, done in the name of ‘bringing down Fidel,’ which has always been their great objective, have forced people to try to find other ways, because the human factor and the ties among Cuban families are strong, even despite the political differences that may exist. Families have a very strong pull.

“I think that the embargo is totally inhumane, especially when we know that the people who planned and created the machinery behind all of it are Cubans, too. We really know that Washington is simply responding to the Cuban interests in Miami that have voting power.

“To think that we are doing it to ourselves! That's the most difficult piece for me, that it's Cubans that are driving this hard policy against Cuba. They say that in their hearts they adore Cuba, but it is an ill-natured adoration, because they are filled with hate for one man! They look past all of the needs of a people just to concentrate their hate on this one man. Really the embargo doesn't affect Fidel or Raúl, or the few on top; it affects the people, the families.”

What is your analysis about your experience in Cuba compared to your life here in Miami?

“Sometimes people in Miami think that the right-wing Cubans have formed their own government here. There are still some freedoms that they can’t take from us, but just imagine if those people were in charge of the government, the little country of Miami! We would have here just what we have in Cuba, but on the right. That is, sometimes I don’t understand the difference; we left Cuba asking for freedom, and we arrived here because we thought we could express different opinions.”

What would you like to read in this book that I am working on?

“I’d like the book to have these anecdotes, and I would like to read it after the embargo has been lifted... Oh! If the embargo were lifted today, the book could tell us about new life after the embargo. I hope that it doesn’t have to be a book that tells the horrors of the embargo, or a book to try to lift the embargo; rather I would like to read a book that tells about the embargo as a thing of the past.”

But the embargo is part of the present...

“I would like to find the hearts of people on both sides shouting to the world, asking the world to understand that it’s ‘enough already!’ It has been too many years. It’s inhumane; families are separated. Beyond that small group of extremists in Miami, there are people shouting it out, and people whispering, too, because they still don’t have the right to vote here in the United States.

“Others are afraid. There are many people who are afraid to express their hopes that the embargo will be lifted. It’s incredible that this fear exists here in the United States. Here it’s a sub-government of a sub-government, because this group really believes it has the authority to speak on behalf of all Cubans, as if we, the exiles, were a monolithic force, just like the Cuban government says that they are all revolutionaries with unconditional support for Fidel, the Homeland and the Revolution. It’s the same thing here for the exiles. We haven’t learned the lesson, and that’s why we still don’t see a change, but sometimes these things can’t be forced.”

“When we really learn the lesson on both sides, and come together as Cubans, we will set aside our differences, and be different, because we can be different. We need to be more tolerant, because tolerance is a word that lets us begin to be open.

“This is a great opportunity, I think it’s so important to get voices out to explain and talk about this issue. We need the world to hear that the exile population in Miami isn’t just one great monolith, and that it just isn’t true that most people really want to keep these same conditions in our relationship with Cuba.”

WAITING FOR “THAT EQUIPMENT”




Olivia, Noelia, and Deisi.

**“What she is really missing is the catheter device . . .
they tell us that it comes from abroad.”**

Three year old Olivia is one of ten children at the William Soler Hospital in Havana who have been waiting for over a year for heart catheters made by U.S. companies. The catheters are used to dilate valves and close congenital defects. Because of the blockade, Cuba has not been able to legally obtain this equipment.

Surgeons performing infant cardiovascular operations at the William Soler Hospital are limited in the various surgical techniques they can use, because they are not able to obtain necessary materials from the United States. The official report from the hospital to the Office of Economic Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Relations, to which I had access, lists 44 items that are needed for infant cardiovascular interventions, but are unobtainable. Among the missing materials are prosthetic valves, previously obtained through the American company Saint Jude Medical, which has since stopped the sale of goods to Cuba as a result of U.S. Treasury Department restrictions. This has had negative repercussions not only for surgical activity in the William Soler Hospital, but also for boys and girls who have arrhythmias and need pacemakers.



The hospital report adds that it could not obtain some supplies because the companies Boston Scientific and Amplatzter declined to make sales to Cuba. As a result, the waiting list has gone up for children with cardiopathies, whose treatment includes the closure of congenital defects such as Atrial Septal Defect and Patent Ductus Arteriosus. Likewise, the U.S. Treasury Department restrictions result in new names being added every day to the waiting list for catheter interventions.

The worst part of this situation is that the Children's Cardio-Center still needs to perform open-heart surgery on these children, without all the medically-indicated materials, and with the risk that these procedures entail.

Olivia is one of the affected children. Her family's apartment on 210th Street, Number 5502, between 55th and 57th in the neighborhood of La Lisa, has only two chairs, a long rug hanging in the living room and a television. Pictures hang on the wall, one of Olivia's brother, and one of her mother.

Deisi, the girl's grandmother, a woman getting on in years but still strong, opens the door; her gaze is sad, like someone who is anxiously waiting for good news that never comes.

"Are you from the hospital?" she asks with an inquiring look, turning her eyes to Kaloian, the photographer who has opened the viewfinder on the camera.

"No, I'm a researcher who wants to know how the U.S. blockade against Cuba has impacted your life. I'm not here to ask your political opinions, but I've been interested in your life since I learned about your granddaughter's illness."

Noelia, Olivia's mother, asks Deisi to bring Olivia, but not before changing her into a nice white dress and doing her hair with red ribbons for the photographer.

Noelia and Deisi agree to be interviewed. Noelia asks her mother to tell the story, and explains that she works at the airport and spends long days away from home, so Olivia's grandmother takes care of her. She also tells us about the wait and uncertainty of not knowing when her daughter will be free from this extremely delicate situation. Deisi continues the story:

"When she first had an epileptic episode we took her to the polyclinic, and from there they sent her to the pediatric center in Marianao; that's where they found the epilepsy, and when they finally did all the tests they found a cardiovascular impairment, too. When she was born she had an injured heart, but it has gotten worse and we sent her to the William Soler Hospital. The doctors have been very good to us; but they didn't have the medicine because of the blockade, and we have been waiting for over a year.

"Now she takes Sodium Valproate for the seizures, but what she is really missing is the catheter device. That's an imported instrument, and they told us they were waiting for it to arrive. When we checked again, they said they were still waiting. They tell us that it comes from abroad.

"It's been terrible. We went to see the doctor; and she told us that the heart surgery was very dangerous but that it had to be done, that many children have had the operation and, and it has gone well. Since her injury at birth hasn't healed, they have to operate.

"My daughter works at the airport, she leaves at four in the morning and comes back at eight or nine at night, so I've taken care of the child since she was born."

"She is separated from her husband," Deisi continues, "almost since the child was born. Imagine how it was for us, the two of us alone here, the girl had seizures. She can't eat too much, can't have fats or candies. With all the shortages we have, and we still have to wait for the equipment so they can operate!

“We have to get her special things, beef, fish, chicken, any kind of protein, whenever we can; and we always have to have milk on hand. If she eats too late, she gets sick. For example the other day she had a fever, with diarrhea and vomiting that lasted seven days. They said it was a virus; but with her you have to be very careful, and we get worried very easily.

“I had to stop working to come and take care of the child. My house is in Bauta [a municipality of the Havana Province], but I really need to be here to help, because Olivia needs a lot of care.”

Noelia added: “The hospital asked for our contact information to be able to let us know when the supplies came in, so they could operate. Now we are trying to work out the telephone, because right now we have to bother the neighbors for it, and my mother gets worried.”

Have they set a date for Olivia’s operation?

“No, she keeps taking the Sodium Valproate for the epilepsy; and waiting for the surgical device to come in. We put our faith in God and hope everything comes out all right. She is very young, but she prays with all her heart, for her heart, that He may make her well. She knows a lot, she talks a lot.

“When she was born, she was also missing one of her fingers. They were going to operate, but then her epilepsy began and they found her heart problems, too; also her heart condition keeps one of her veins from working like it should, and all of that needs to be fixed with the operation. So we’ll see.”

Even though Noelia and Deisi are women of few words, their faces reflect the anguish of waiting.

What is it that you wish for most?

“I want the surgical devices to come as fast as possible, for everything to go well with the doctors, and for God to help us.”

We said goodbye to Olivia. Before we left, the grandmother insisted that we try to see if we could find the surgical devices for her granddaughter to have the operation “abroad,” to put an end to the daily sadness that has invaded the whole family. They fear that after one of her seizures Olivia may “not come back,” but their faith in God gives them hope that sooner or later the “device” will arrive.

Almost all of the surgeries performed at the William Soler Hospital, as well as other Cuban hospitals, are for congenital cardiopathies. The doctors at these hospitals are proud, however, of their high survival rate and the eventual growth of these children into a normal life. We hope that this will be the case as well for Olivia!



TRAVEL WITHOUT RESTRICTIONS

Ileana Casanova, teacher in Miami.

“...because I think the embargo has affected all of us, on both sides.”

“I left Cuba when I was ten, in 1961, in that first wave of exiles. I left with my parents, together with my mother because my father had already made the trip in 1960 through Mexico. He crossed the border into Texas and waited there for a few months, thinking that we would go through Mexico, too, but we never got the visas and we ended up leaving through the freedom flights to Miami. My father came to get us, and I grew up on the U.S.-Mexico border, that's my connection to Mexico.

“My family is from the Sagua La Grande area. I have a brother, he was four years old at the time, and I was ten, about to turn 11. It's important for me to tell you about my time in Sagua. I grew up in a very close family. My entire block was filled with my family, and my grandmother and an uncle also lived in our house.”

When Ileana had to leave Cuba it affected her greatly. She defines the subsequent years as “traumatic,” as her family was divided; four family members lived in the United States and the rest stayed in Cuba. Although they always wrote and spoke on the phone, separation was very difficult for a family like hers.

“I got used to Texas. I went to McAllen High School, and then I studied at the University of Texas. At the university I got more intellectual stimulation, and I got very curious about politics. It was the '70s and I was at a very liberal university. I met people with much more liberal and progressive ideas. In 1979 I had the opportunity to go to Cuba—I was jumping to go when the flights were reopened in 1978. I ended up going with a group of American professors... I slipped in. When I got there they almost didn't let me in because it was a trip just for Americans, but I found another Cuban and we said 'we aren't leaving here!' That was my first trip to Cuba, in 1979.

“It was very, very exciting; it meant a lot to go back and see all my family. It was as if I had never left, and they treated me as if I was still a little girl: they wanted to wash my underwear, cook for me. They didn't let me do anything for myself; it was as if I was a little girl again....”

We stop the interview for a moment because Ileana begins to cry.

“I don't know, I thought the visit was going to be more politicized, but it wasn't. It was like going to visit family in a normal country, because we didn't talk about politics but about family ties and memories. I made it to Sagua. Because I arrived in Havana with the group, it was difficult to get away; but they eventually let me go to Sagua La Grande.



“That’s when I found my roots again. Sagua La Grande is what I knew, not Havana; and the first thing I did was to say: ‘give me a bicycle, I’m going to ride all over Sagua.’ I found where I went to school, the cemetery, my grandfather’s grave; and it was all familiar, as if I had never left... I always held the streets in my memory. I remembered them whenever I could... that was my first trip. I had a very good time with my cousins, great aunts and uncles; my mother’s father had already died. It was an important time for me. I went three more times in the ’80s.”

She tells how she moved to Miami in 1992 and returned to Cuba the year after that.

“In 1993 I went back to Cuba at the height of the Special Period. Life was tough, but again, going to my family’s house was like entering back into that world that I left behind. We don’t talk much about politics when I go. Some people support the government, and some don’t; but we don’t talk about it. We all have a very good time.”

“That same year I went two more times. What do I do when I am there? I visit my family, and travel throughout Cuba. I have a cousin in Trinidad; I travel to see him and his son. The last time I went was a great trip because I went all the way to Baracoa. It was beautiful. When I’m in Cuba, I have to take advantage of the time and see more of the island; and last time I went to Baracoa, stopping in Santiago. What I do is I travel around the island for a few days, mostly with my family, and then I jump on a bus myself to visit new places.”

About her thoughts for the future Ileana commented:

“Right now I would like to see them lift the travel restrictions. It’s absurd for a country that is supposedly the model of freedom of expression and human rights to prohibit me from travelling to a certain country. I went to Vietnam and when I got there I said ‘wait, isn’t this a Communist country?’ I can go to Vietnam whenever I well please, and I can take all the money I want to spend, and there’s no problem. How is it that there is a double standard toward Cuba?”

Do you basically identify the blockade as the travel restrictions, or do you think that there are other aspects to the blockade?

“There’s the economic blockade that I think even benefits the Cuban government a little because it provides many excuses. There are things that are really caused by the blockade and others that aren’t, but I know that at least certain sectors have felt the effects. I know about the medicine situation because my four cousins are doctors, and my brother is a doctor, too. He went to Cuba with me, and he told me:

‘There are machines there that they can’t find the pieces for, or they cost three times as much because of the blockade. If they could buy the equipment for the X-ray machine in the United States it would be cheaper, but they have to go through a third country and it gets expensive.’ ”

“So the blockade surely has also affected the Cuban economy.

“But it’s a double-edged sword. They say ‘Hey that building is falling down! Everything’s deteriorating in Havana! It’s because of the blockade.’”

Do you think, then, that the blockade has favored the Cuban government?

“I don’t think there’s anything positive about the blockade. There’s nothing positive about it, and the entire world is against the blockade. I think that the benefit for Cuba has been to play the victim, but we haven’t moved from that. Cuba is still there, and we have had the blockade for forty-some years, and it’s all still the same.”

If the blockade is lifted, what do you think will happen?

“I think that it would benefit the Cuban people.”

What would you like to see in this book I am going to write? What would you hope for in a book such as this one?

“That it reaches people who think differently from me, to change their minds. It’s not the same if only I read it, though I would love to read it.

“I think that individual cases and testimonies from families that have been separated would be important to include, because people think that Fidel is the one that benefits from people going to Cuba. I tell them: ‘when I go to Cuba I stay at my family’s home, not in a hotel. If we go to eat, it’s at a *paladar*, or a restaurant owned by a private citizen. My aunt, 90% of what she buys she gets on the black market, just like most people in Cuba, because it’s cheaper. I don’t stay at a hotel or eat at state restaurants because, in addition to being less expensive, paladares make better food. In Sagua when I go I eat at my family’s house; it’s just a small town. There’s nowhere else to go! In any case, I prefer to give money to my family so they can buy food and prepare it at home.’”

When I ask her for a summary of the effects of the blockade on “ordinary Cubans,” on both sides, Ileana quickly responds:

“Cruelty, cruelty. It’s very cruel.”



DEFENDING THE PLANET



Irania, Director of the Urban Waste Collection Center in Guantánamo.

“I was so angry! ...I felt so powerless that I couldn’t find the right words for the Guantanamera!”

Irania Martínez García is originally from Camagüey, but she says that at heart she is from Guantánamo, a “Guantanamera.” She was nominated by the viewers of CNN in 2007 for the CNN Heroes award in the category of “Defending the Planet,” for teaching organic agriculture techniques using domestic waste.

Irania is the creator and promoter of the Ecological Urban Waste Processing Center of Guantánamo, [CEPRU by its Spanish acronym,] in the eastern part of the island. The project, oriented toward using domestic waste for agricultural production, has received many national and United Nations awards and is beginning to be implemented across the country.

The newspaper *Venceremos*, in its editorial on March 21, 2008, reported:

“The world witnessed another episode in the blockade against the Caribbean nation when in the gala of “CNN Heroes: An All-Star Tribute” it was announced that Irania Martínez, recipient of the prize as a Defender of the Planet, was unable to travel to receive the prize in person because of the restrictions imposed by the Helms-Burton Act against Cuban citizens traveling to the United States.”

Irania wasn't able to participate in the ceremony held on December 7, 2007 at the Natural History Museum of New York, nor was she able to receive the monetary award of ten thousand U.S. dollars.

We traveled to Guantánamo from Havana in search of Irania, who had supplied information previously in our search for information on the impact of the blockade on Cuban families. It wasn't difficult to find the place, as she lived almost directly on the garbage dump. After a few missteps we got there, where the Guantánamo dump is still currently located.

We were shocked when we first arrived: the place was shining and clean, not at all like we imagined. Immediately in front of us was the imposing figure of Irania. A tall black woman with an attractive gaze, she came over to tell us all the details of her work.

Who is Irania?

"Nothing special. I am a mother, and a wife, very revolutionary already though I think I can be more revolutionary still; I am just a simple worker, not a professional. My experience? I've done many jobs: I've been an office worker, thread spinner in a spinning mill, cattle raiser, and a technical specialist; and right now for example I am working on urban agriculture in CEPRU, and I work especially on environmental issues. I am a very demanding person. Sometimes I even get very critical with myself; I tell my workers that the leader should be prepared to perform hara-kiri to set an example and be able to make demands. When I talk to workers I look them in the face, I don't avert my eyes, because the subconscious of each person speaks loudly and says 'this is what I think, this is the esteem I hold you in'. I want my subconscious to be able to speak this way, so I look at people directly. I can be very demanding.

"I have two children. I had three but I lost my daughter when she was 13 years old to a terrible disease, leukemia; she got sick when she was ten. I still have my son who is 19 now; and [I have] CEPRU, which is now seven years old. That's the way I see it: I gave birth to it, I raised it, I went through this process that women suffer, I took care of it, and I won't allow anybody to hurt it, not one tree, not one plant, not even the garbage that comes through the doors."

How did the idea start?

"The idea started in the year 2000. I started working on urban agriculture in 1999, and I was transferred here in the year 2000. When I got here, the first thing I did was to inventory the 28 subprograms for urban agriculture and review each one to see how it was doing and what its potential was, and organize them to make them as effective as possible. When I came to this area and saw what was going on—I had grown up in an urban area—I was surprised. I had never lived near a garbage dump, and I didn't know the negative impacts it had on the surrounding area. I hadn't had that experience, and when I got here it was a terrible sight. It shouldn't be that in Cuba there are people living in places like this, under these conditions. These problems must be solved.

"The dump was established here during the Special Period when, because of the situation that the country was living, they made the decision to provisionally locate the dump in this isolated area. But people began to build their houses here; and this became a neighborhood in deplorable conditions, without roads, without lights, without a recreational area for people to exercise and practice sports. [There was] not even a park for children to play together in the afternoons. The houses were in very poor conditions, very poor! They had dirt floors and horrendous sanitation systems. I spoke to the doctors in the area and the information they gave me on the death rates due to infections, respiratory disease and diarrhea were frighteningly high.

"The dump represents the economic livelihoods of many people; they take raw materials from the dump to find what they need, though none of them are aware of the danger that they expose themselves to by going into these areas without any health or safety regulation.

"I made a video to be able to document what was going on. When I realized that change was slow in coming, I began to hold meetings with the community to talk to people about this idea, about how successful it could be and the improvements they could see in their lives. I wanted people to join me, to help me materialize this idea and show that it was possible... We never wrote out a project, I just had an idea and we put it into action."

Were you able to get people to participate in the project?

"Seven people joined me, including this woman here..."

She points out an active woman who is moving around near us.



"...she is a founder here; she worked on this project without a salary. The people who work with me are volunteers, contributing their own efforts and talents."

And now, when you look back at what you've done, do you think you have achieved that idea? Have you put your vision into action?

"My idea was to create an area, a center that could fulfill a social function by receiving trash, and to, with that trash, carry out actions that could mitigate the negative environmental impacts of the dump. How? By incorporating all of the urban agriculture sub-programs into the dump management plans, using organic material and receiving trash, but processing it to make fertilizer and efficiently use everything we can."


"We've even gone a little further. We collect things that have been discarded, buried and thrown away. We try to find solutions for that waste. From day one when we started working to improve the environmental conditions here, we have been in constant action, working with children, adults... working with everybody, doing everything we can!"

And moving on to another topic, where do you get most of the resources with which you work?

"Unfortunately, we have only had one grant approved, from the small grants fund of the UN Development Program's environmental fund. We are drawing our resources from there currently, to install protection measures, buy tools and secure other resources for collective use. We have also had support from the Saint Augustine Florida Solidarity Group. They are from the United States, and they're the ones that made it possible for me to participate in the contest for the CNN Heroes prize. We were lucky enough to win the prize, but we couldn't collect the reward."

Speaking about the blockade, Irania said:

"Imagine it, here we were already making plans for those ten thousand dollars. We had already distributed them amongst the different needs here. It was a personal prize, but it was going to be shared among the workers; and we even wanted to throw a giant party with all of the children of the community."



“I already could see the balloons and ‘piñatas’, beautiful colors everywhere. I was already imagining the children’s books... But we ended up with nothing! I got over it because I was already psychologically prepared. I always suspected that it would be impossible for those ten thousand dollars to arrive, but my workers were hopeful. When they finally told me that they couldn’t give us the prize money, I asked myself ‘how am I going to tell these people who were dreaming of this?’ This money that they were going to receive could have solved many of their problems. It was a dream, and they had been making plans. I asked myself: ‘what can I do to keep them from being so disappointed? How can I get them to keep struggling and not lose hope?’”

“I was so angry, because they are really such cowards! It’s an act of cowardice against our people; we haven’t done anything wrong, our people haven’t done anything wrong. I was angry! I felt so powerless that I couldn’t [even] find the right words for the Guantanamera. It’s just the way I felt. The workers were depressed for a few days; they were walking slowly for a few days, as if they were under a great weight.

“I told them: ‘Hey, not one step back, not even to build up speed, you hear? We are going forward, and forget about it! Something will come up for us, and we never know when victory lies just around the bend.’”

Irania, I came to ask you about the effects of the blockade in human terms, and I’m fascinated by your story. You have been able to produce love, produce beauty out of garbage. What more can you tell me about it?

“Yesterday a journalist was interviewing me from Havana, and I was explaining to him that we are done using the word ‘garbage’ for garbage. If we have done all of this using garbage, how is it that we Cubans, from wherever we are, won’t be able to live in peace, in a healthy environment? All together, with everybody together, including the Americans, we are going to be able to lift the blockade.”

Irania doesn’t lose hope that someday the blockade will be lifted and she can share her experience around the world. She is trying currently to multiply her efforts across the entire island and to other Latin American countries.



AFTERWORD: ALBEIT INHUMANE, THE BLOCKADE STANDS

A book, even a short report, is generally difficult for its authors. We are often unsatisfied upon finishing it because we always find imperfections.

This book is missing the testimony of some of the people who were interviewed both in Cuba and in Miami, and they will surely ask why they don't appear in the text. The only explanation is the natural selection and range of choices that we make when we write, based on the ideas that we want to transmit. We surely commit injustices by leaving out testimonies just as strong as the ones we ended up publishing. The lack of space and time to write also worked against us.

To try to reflect the social impact of the blockade/embargo from its deep human dimension through a book of testimonies took courage in every stage of its interpretation. The truth, as so clearly expressed by many of the interviewees, transcends imagination; the existence of daily life in the middle of the blockade/embargo makes us shift our viewpoints on the economic, social, and political events that have taken place over many long years.

Often we find that very politicized topics, such as the one in this book, are only imagined and understood outside the scope of daily life, without the realization of the potential for change from, as was the case here, "walking Cubans" on both shores. Many U.S. citizens also shared their opinions about the injustice of this embargo against Cuba that continues intact, even though it is a failed policy opposed by all the governments of Latin America and the majority of countries around the world.

After finishing this book, I see a very important sign for the future: the human capacity to overcome adversity, and the importance of contact and human relations between families, friends, neighbors, and everyone. Together, these things will overcome the blockade. Looking back upon it, we will one day see the blockade as a policy that tried to starve a people and ended up building international solidarity.

APPENDIX

Background: Origins of the Blockade/Embargo

On February 3, 1962, the government of the United States, through Presidential Proclamation #3447, established an “embargo on all trade with Cuba,” based on the powers granted to the President in section 620(a) of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961.

According to now-declassified State Department documents, discussions about applying economic pressures on Cuba began in 1959. By April of 1960, a State Department official was proposing, in an internal document, that the best way to undermine support for the Castro government was to “... [generate] disenchantment and disaffection based on economic dissatisfaction and hardship ... every possible measure should be undertaken promptly to weaken the economic life of Cuba.”¹⁰

In July of 1960, the Eisenhower Administration terminated Cuba’s sugar quota, the agreement that guaranteed that a specific quantity of Cuban sugar could be imported to the United States. When this idea had first been discussed, in June of 1959, then-Secretary of State Christian Herter, in a memo to the president, had described it as an “act of economic war.” Sugar made up about 80 percent of the value of the island’s total exports, and in 1958 up to 58 percent of Cuba’s sugar exports were directed toward the United States. Ending the sugar quota was intended as a severe economic blow to Cuba.

In October of 1960, the U.S. Commerce Department restricted U.S. exports to Cuba.

In January of 1961, the State Department issued an order prohibiting U.S. citizens from traveling on a U.S. passport to Cuba without special permission.

By 1962, the United States had settled on a general trade embargo. The president used his executive authority to order the Treasury Secretary to implement all measures and regulations necessary to effectively prohibit imports to the United States of all products of Cuban origin, and of goods imported through or directly from the island. At the same time, the president ordered the Commerce Secretary to continue to reinforce all measures prohibiting exports from the United States to Cuba, giving rise to the Cuban Import Regulations of 1962.

Weeks later, these regulations were tightened even further, using executive authority under the Trading with the Enemy Act. The rules were revised again in 1963 under the name of the Cuban Assets Control Regulations. Among these regulations was the prohibition on spending money in Cuba without Treasury Department permission, a rule that formalized the ban on travel to Cuba without special authorization.¹¹

All these regulations were announced and implemented under presidential authority. They fell within the broad discretionary powers that the Foreign Assistance Act and the Trading with the Enemy Act grants to the Executive branch in foreign policy affairs.

These executive orders remained in effect, with some minor modifications, for the next three decades. In 1977, President Jimmy Carter first eased, then ended travel restrictions; but these were re-imposed by President Ronald Reagan in 1982. Carter also permitted foreign subsidiaries of U.S. corporations to make sales to Cuba, opening the first significant U.S. sales to Cuba in fifteen years.

¹⁰ Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-1960, Volume VI, Cuba, United States Government Printing Office, Washington 19914, p.885.

¹¹ Álvarez Guerra and Pino Rivero, 1996.



In 1992 the U.S. Congress approved the so-called Cuban Democracy Act, also known as the Torricelli Act, which imposed even greater restrictions intended to reinforce the political and economic isolation of Cuba. The act reversed the Carter liberalization, prohibiting foreign subsidiaries of U.S. companies from making sales to Cuba, among other measures. The text of this act emphasized themes of human rights and democracy, although in practice it paralyzed 800 million dollars worth of trade by third-country-based subsidiaries of U.S. corporations with Cuba, 90 percent of which was medicine and food.

The Torricelli Act stands out for its extra-territorial nature, which can be seen especially in the content of sections describing international aid and sanctions. The ban on foreign subsidiary sales applies even when these companies are located in third-party states and operate under the laws of those foreign nations. Another one of the distinctly extra-territorial provisions of the law is its prohibition of any vessel that has visited a Cuban port within the last 180 days from landing at a United States port unless it obtains a license from the U.S. Treasury Department.

U.S. economic restrictions, which had primarily been established by presidential decree, were finally made into law four years later, in 1996, with the passage of the “Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act,” also known as the Helms-Burton Act. This law consolidated all rules, regulations, laws, and presidential orders regarding the financial, economic, and commercial embargo against Cuba that had been adopted in 1962. Through this act, all of the previous regulations relating to the embargo were given the full force of law. The powers that had been vested upon the President of the United States in the Foreign Assistance Act to amend or terminate any provision of the embargo were passed on to the Congress. While the Executive branch retained the authority to modify some aspects of the travel restrictions, it no longer had the power to eliminate them.

In 1999, Section 211 of the Omnibus Appropriations Act, first introduced as an amendment in the U.S. Congress on October 21, 1998, again ratcheted up the embargo, this time to disrupt the development of trademark and patent relationships and intellectual property rights.

This new section, promoted by several Cuban-American members of Congress, was designed to keep the rights over trademarks and commercial brands of Cuban state enterprises from being recognized in the United States.

According to a number of jurists, Section 211 is incompatible with the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS Agreement), as it prevents holders of commercial trademarks and brands, and their successors, from having access to U.S. courts and tribunals to enforce their rights. Likewise, it violates the basic principles of the World Trade Organization (WTO), such as National Treatment and Most-Favored Nation Treatment, stipulated in articles 3 and 4 of the TRIPS Agreement.¹²

The only action taken that has favored trade with the island was during the final years of the Clinton presidency (1993-2001), when in 2000, the United States Congress repealed the prohibition on the sale of food and medicines to Cuba, with the conditions that these operations be paid for in cash and that no credits would be available for such transactions. (Commerce Department export rules continue to make medical sales particularly difficult.)

In 2004, the George W. Bush Administration tightened travel restrictions in an effort to increase Cuba’s political isolation. Cuban Americans, who had been under looser travel restrictions than other U.S. citizens since the late 1970s, were prohibited from visiting relatives in Cuba more often than once every three years and were permitted to visit only immediate family. These restrictions also limited money sent back to Cuba through family remittances to a maximum of 1,200 dollars per year.

¹² Op.cit



In April of 2009, President Barack Obama ordered an end to these restrictions on Cuban-American family travel. Cuban Americans can now visit immediate family, cousins, nephews, nieces, and other family members as often as they wish and can send unlimited remittances.

Despite these allowances, the restrictions against travel of non-Cuban-American U.S. citizens to Cuba remain. These restrictions, first imposed in 1961, were ended by the Carter Administration in 1977 and then re-established by the Reagan Administration in 1982. Subsequent administrations have sometimes eased and sometimes tightened their interpretation of the restrictions, but all have maintained the principle that U.S. citizens must obtain permission from the Treasury Department in order to travel to Cuba.

Likewise, U.S. restrictions make it difficult for Cuban citizens who would like to visit their family members in the United States to obtain visas, generally on the grounds that these Cubans may intend to immigrate permanently. Recently, it has become easier for Cuban scholars, artists, and others to obtain temporary visas for performances, conferences, etc., though it remains an uncertain process.

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