

A Story of Love and Generosity: 50 years later

By Carmencita Romanach

A very special reunion took place last March 30, 2013 in Miami, Florida. I had the privilege to be invited to this Family Reunion and will try to convey some of the joy, the love and the emotions shared by representatives of three different families (Ramirez/Johnson /Fernandez) that share a common bond, a bond of love and generosity that goes back over 50 years in time.



Tete Ramirez, José Fernández, Jean Johnson, Nenetta Ramirez, Jackie Johnson, Nina Ramirez, María Fernández
(Picture Courtesy Nina Ramirez).

Ms. Jean Johnson (Pedro Pan foster mother), from Rome, NY and Ms. Amalia (Nenetta) Ramirez (Pedro Pan mother) from Camaguey, Cuba, met surrounded by their children and former foster children at Nenetta's home in Miami last March 2013. The families had remained in contact but Jean and Nenetta had not seen each other again in over 40 years. It was a most joyful reunion where you could sense the joy and the love that surrounds these families. Jose Fernandez, who generously planned this reunion and made it actually happen, came with his wife from Puerto Rico especially for the occasion. Nenetta had suffered a stroke some time ago and I wasn't able to interview her directly but she obviously was sharing in the joy and the laughter and was deeply touched by Jean's and Jackie's presence as they were so much a part of her life and her children's. Upon their arrival from Cuba in 1962, Nenetta and her husband Rolando (Pucho) settled in Rome, NY and continued their relationship with the Johnsons for many years until they moved to Miami.

The story starts as the 4 Ramirez children, Angie (13), Nina (12), Tete (11) and Rolando (9) leave Cuba through Operation Pedro Pan on January 17, 1962. Upon arrival they were taken to the Florida City Camp. Shortly after their arrival they were selected among a group of Pedro Pan children by Msgr. Francis J. Willenburg (Catholic Charities of the Rome/Utica area) to be placed with foster families in his area. Nina recalls their arrival at Utica airport and how Msgr. Willenburg managed to find the only Spanish- speaking family in town, the Rodriguez family to accompany him to the airport, so they could translate for the Pedro Pan children. The Rodriguez family brought their young son, Sergio, with them, something the Ramirez remembers fondly to this day. (A short time ago, Sergio Rodriguez reconnected with them as well).

In the meantime, the Johnson's family composed of Carleton (Brud), Jean and their two children, Jackie and Jerry, living in Rome, NY heard the news of a group of Cuban children arriving in their area and needing a home. Ms. Jean Johnson remembers that her daughter Jackie (10) came home with the news and she immediately volunteered to take one Cuban child to her home. Next thing she knew, she got a call from Catholic Charities asking her if she would be willing to take the 4 Ramirez siblings instead of one so they wouldn't be separated. At her 88 years, she is sharp and witty, and she told me laughing, "I am happy that I volunteered only for one, I don't know what would have happened if I had volunteered for 2!"



1962 – Angie, Jerry, Jean, Nina, Brud, Tete, Rolando, Jackie
(Picture Courtesy Nina Ramirez).

Later on, the Johnson family would foster two more Pedro Pan children, Maria and Jose Fernandez. The Johnsons fostered six Pedro Pan children in total through a period of several years. Jean said, "We had inherited a big home and I thought, this children need a home and we've got it, so, why not?" After the Ramirez children reunited with their parents, when she got a call from Catholic Charities to take another Pedro Pan Cuban girl, Maria (17), as a foster child, she said yes right away. Maria's brother, Jose (15), was

already living with a local foster family and Maria wanted to be close to her brother (she ended up staying with the Johnsons for four years). Ms. Johnson remembers that they asked her, “Don’t you want to consult with your husband first?” and her reply was, “No! He’ll be happy!” and she added, “I remember when the Ramirez children arrived he couldn’t wait to take them around!”

Eventually, Jose’s foster family would leave the area and the Johnson’s stepped in again and took Jose into their home. Jose’s roommate, Renato, was taken in by the Ramirez family until his parents came. Jose remembers how Jean was such a great cook and always made him feel like family. He also remembers with gratitude how the Johnson family not only helped them but also helped and supported both the Ramirez (Pucho and Nenetta) and the Fernandez (Cheo and Mary) parents to settle in when they reunited with their children in Rome, NY. The families formed a strong bond of love, generosity and gratitude that still unites them to this day.



1964 -Maria’s graduation. Brud, Maria, Jose, Jean and Jerry.
(Picture Courtesy Maria Fernandez).

When I asked Jean about her impression of the Ramirez children when they arrived she said, “They blended right in, they were family, they felt like my own!” She added, “The only problem was the language, but pretty soon, Angie, the eldest could communicate very well in English and that was it” and she added, “By the time the Fernandez children arrived, it was a piece of cake!”

Obviously, she makes it seem as if it was no problem at all, which only adds to her generous spirit, but taking care of 6 children, when you already have two of your own is definitely not a piece of cake at all. Just think about the amount of laundry and cooking and caring and love that you have to share!

Amidst laughter and joy, and some tears too, many stories were remembered during their reunion, like the long lines to go to the bathroom.....the house was big but only had one bath! At times there were 8 in the house and when the Cuban parents arrived and stayed in their home for a while, they were 10 of them to share one bath!

When the Ramirez parents arrived, one day the children went to school and the husbands to work, Jean didn't know Spanish and Nenetta didn't speak English but she wanted to help, so she went ahead and cleaned the bathroom, and when Jean came in Nenetta said, "I do, I do"....Jean didn't want to make her feel bad so she said OK and sprayed the tub and gave Nenetta the cleaning tools to do it.....so she had to do it all over again! Nenetta made a point of learning English after that incident as Nina recalls laughing.

Jean also recalls the time when they found a priest to hear the Cuban children's confession in Spanish and she took them in to Church. She explained to them to go to Confession, then go to the altar to pray their penance and come back towards her, she would be waiting in the pews. After the Rolando (9) finished his confession, he came back to sit with her and she told him, "No, you have to go and do your penance now." Rolando said, "No sins, no penance!" and she immediately said to him: "I can remember a sin or two, so go right back!!" and he did. "Rolando used to hugged me so hard." she remembers fondly (Rolando passed away on 2005).



1962-Camping Memories: Jackie, Tete, Jerry, Angie, Rolando, Nina
(Picture Courtesy Nina Ramirez).

They also remembered the camping trips, to Niagara Falls, to Washington, etc. They all travelled together as a family and Jean added, "We had a lot of fun together!" All of the "former Pedro Pan children" agreed with her and have great memories of all their families spending time together as one after the Cuban parent's arrival.

Nina also recalls how one of the most difficult moments for the Johnson's was when they told the Ramirez children that their parents were coming from Cuba and at the last minute were notified that their departure had been cancelled. So, the next time they told them, they said nothing to the children and just told them they were going out and headed to the airport, their hearts braking because they didn't want to disappoint them again... it was October 1962 and luckily the Ramirez' parents made it just in time before the October Missile Crisis.

I asked Jackie Johnson if it was hard for her as a child to share her parents with so many other children. She said, "No, I had a lot of fun, and when their parents arrived, I was the one going to their homes to stay overnight!" She recalls quite a few Spanish words and enjoyed the reunion with her foster sisters and brother: Nina and Tete (Ramirez), Maria and Jose (Fernandez) that were present on this special day. Obviously, she shares the same generous spirit showed by her parents!

Before I left the Reunion, I just wanted to ask Jean Johnson a last question, "Is there a message you want me to tell other Pedro Pan children?" Her reply was, "Just tell them that if they were like the ones I had I would have been happy to take them!"