

With grateful hearts we give thanks to the Lord for all blessings received during our exodus and throughout our lives.

**Board of Directors,
Operation Pedro Pan Group, Inc..**

***The official Pedro Pan Newsletter of Operation Pedro Pan
Group Inc.***

OPERATION PEDRO PAN GROUP, INC. (OPPG)

A National Charitable Organization

www.pedropan.org

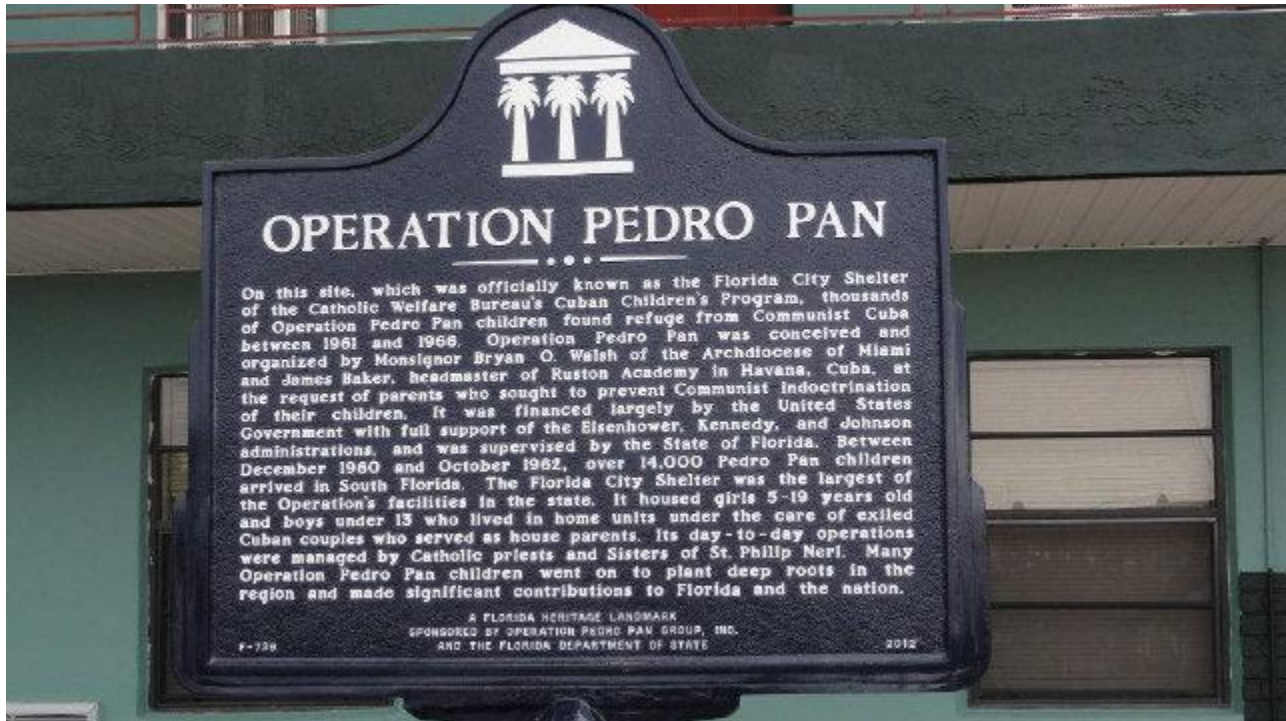
<http://www.facebook.com/OPPGI>



December 2, 2012

Pedro Pan News

Landmark for Operation Pedro Pan



Operation Pedro Pan placard marking the site at Florida City where unaccompanied Cuban children were brought for care in the 1960s through a Catholic Church program.

This historical marker is the first bilingual English/Spanish marker in the State of Florida. The English version of the marker text reads as follows:

On this site, which was officially known as the Florida City Shelter of the Catholic Welfare Bureau's Cuban Children's Program, thousands of Operation Pedro Pan children found refuge from Communist Cuba between 1961 and 1966. Operation Pedro Pan was conceived and organized by Monsignor Bryan O. Walsh of the Archdiocese of Miami and James Baker, headmaster of Ruston Academy in Havana, Cuba, at the request of parents who sought to prevent the Communist indoctrination of their children. It was financed largely by the United States Government with full support of the Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson administrations, and was supervised by the State of Florida. Between December 1960 and October 1962, over 14,000 Pedro Pan children arrived in South Florida. The Florida City Shelter was the largest of the Operation's facilities in the state. It housed girls 5-19 years old and boys under 13 who lived in home units under the care of exiled Cuban couples who served as house parents. Its day-to-day operations were managed by Catholic priests and Sisters of St. Philip Neri. Many Operation Pedro Pan children went on to plant deep roots in the region and made significant contributions to Florida and the nation. A FLORIDA HERITAGE LANDMARK, SPONSORED BY OPERATION PEDRO PAN GROUP, INC. AND THE FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF STATE. 2012

The Spanish version of the Marker reads as follows:

En este sitio, denominado Refugio de Florida City del Programa de Niños Cubanos del Buró Católico de Bienestar Social, miles de niños integrantes de la Operación Pedro Pan recibieron albergue de Cuba Comunista entre 1961 y 1966. La operación fue concebida y organizada por el Monseñor Bryan O. Walsh de la Arquidiócesis de Miami y por James Baker, director de la Academia Ruston, ubicada en La Habana, Cuba, a solicitud de padres que no querían que sus hijos fueran adoctrinados por el régimen. Fue financiada por el gobierno estadounidense, con respaldo de las administraciones de Eisenhower, Kennedy y Johnson y supervisada por el gobierno estatal de Florida. Entre diciembre de 1960 y octubre de 1962, más de 14,000 niños cubanos llegaron al sur de Florida. En el Refugio de Florida City, el mayor del estado, se acogieron niñas entre 5 y 19 años de edad y niños menores de 13. Los menores residían en hogares encabezados por matrimonios cubanos exiliados que fungían como padres. La administración estaba bajo la dirección de sacerdotes católicos y las Hermanas de San Felipe Neri. Muchos niños de Operación Pedro Pan echaron raíces en la región y contribuyeron al desarrollo socioeconómico y cultural de Florida y del país. PLACA PATRIMONIAL DE FLORIDA, AUSPICIADA POR OPERATION PEDRO PAN GROUP, INC.Y EL DEPARTAMENTO DE ESTADO DE FLORIDA. 2012

By CARMEN VALDIVIA (published on the Miami Herald, November 23, 2012)

<http://www.pedropan.org/>

The state of Florida has designated the Operation Pedro Pan's Florida City Camp a Florida Heritage Landmark. Operation Pedro Pan was a program created by the Catholic Welfare Bureau of Miami, in December 1960, at the request of parents in Cuba to provide an opportunity for them to send their children to Miami in order to avoid Marxist-Leninist indoctrination. Over 14,000 unaccompanied Cuban children arrived through Operation Pedro Pan between December 1960 and October 1962. Operation Pedro Pan remains the largest Children Exodus in the Western Hemisphere.

For the past two years, all former Pedro Pan children have been reaching the milestone of the 50th anniversary of their arrival. August 8th, 1962 was my arrival date. On that day, my sister Isa and I arrived here at the camp for the first time.

The Catholic Welfare Bureau's Florida City Camp, located here on this site, was the largest of the operation's shelters and transit stations. It was operated by the Diocese of Miami's Cuban Children's Program, with financing from the United States Program for Unaccompanied Cuban Children and under the supervision of the state of Florida and local

agencies. It is estimated that between 1961 and 1966 several thousand boys and girls resided on its premises.

The camp, which was comprised then of the same buildings which we find now on both sides of NW Second Avenue between 14th and 16th streets, was surrounded by a chain link fence for our protection. The building behind me was under construction at the time and we, the girls at the camp, moved into the newly finished building later that year. The entrance to the camp was from 16th street with the administration office located in the building on the north east corner of the intersection of NW 2nd Avenue and 16th Street.

I recall that as the van that was transporting us approached the camp's entrance we were pleasantly surprised to see a large number of cheering children, who, while pressing against each other and the fence, welcomed our arrival. It was late into the evening, after having spent the entire day at the infamous "La Pecera" at Havana's Rancho Boyeros Airport.

As most of us remember, "La Pecera" was that "initiation rite" we all had to endure to become Pedro Pan children.

Isa and I arrived hungry, scared, tired and empty-handed, having been stripped of everything that was dear to us upon our departure from our homeland. Since the camp's office and dining room were closed for the day, we were taken to the sister's convent, where the nuns filled out the paper work and gave us a much welcomed sandwich and a glass of milk. Immediately afterwards, they introduced us to our house parents, the Cuban couple who would look after us.

The house parents led us to our new home and introduced us to our "hermanitas del exilio," the 20 or so girls under their care with whom we would share that temporary household and in so many instances a lifelong sacred bond.

With the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962, commercial flights between the United States and Cuba ceased and Operation Pedro Pan abruptly came to an end. Parents had no avenue for reunification with their children, other than through third countries like Mexico, Spain and Panama. It was a slow and very difficult process for the parents as well as the children. Isa and I, like all other children at the camp, found ourselves not only stranded

from our parents, but on opposite sides of what appeared to be a looming nuclear war.

Located in an area which was very strategic to the war effort, we endured the anxiety and anguish of those caught up in the theater of war, a theater that was displayed before our eyes and whose instruments of destruction were aimed at our parents in Cuba. At the same time, our parents watched in horror as Cuba's nuclear armament was aimed at their children here in Florida City.

Isa and I lived in this camp for the next three years. We left in the summer of 1965 because the camp was closing. Our parents arrived three months later, after spending eight months in Mexico waiting for their paperwork to clear.

The application for the landmark was prepared and submitted by José Antonio Amaro Reyes, who resides in Georgia, Susana Garrandés of Longwood, and me, a local Miami resident. We are all former residents of the camp. The application was sponsored by Operation Pedro Pan Group, Inc. (OPPG) and the idea originated when members of the project team, who were initially brought together by The Miami Herald's online Network for Operation Pedro Pan, realized that as grown-ups many of the camps former residents, who sought to revisit their early refugee experience, were unable to locate the site of the camp.

Although it was originally conceived as a way of marking its geographic location, it soon evolved into a larger project aimed at preserving the historical and cultural significance of the camp for the state of Florida and in the larger context of United States-Cuba relations during the Cold War period.

In 2009, I started coming back to this site on a daily basis with my Pedro Pan husband Guillermo Paz, an architect like myself, in order to photograph and inventory the buildings that comprised the former camp and to note their architectural features in order to formulate the physical description aspect of the application for the marker.

After a short and unexpected illness this year, my husband was laid to rest the day before the marker arrived but I assure you that he is here in spirit. The project, which took our team over two years to complete, also envisioned renaming Pedro Pan Place, the two-block stretch of NW 2nd Avenue that runs through the heart of the old camp between NW 14th and

16th streets. The City of Florida City Council recently approved a resolution granting that street renaming request and we just witnessed the unveiling of the street sign with that very special name.

This past August, on the eve of my 50th Pedro Pan anniversary, my granddaughter Paloma, turned 12 years old, the same age that I was when I arrived at this Pedro Pan Place and it dawned on me that the sacrifice that my parents and all Pedro Pan parents made is the gift that keeps on giving, because it not only saved Isa and me, but our children and grandchildren, who today enjoy the freedom they intended for us and now that legacy of selfless love is theirs to pass on.

My sister Isa has since passed away so in both of our names, I thank my mother, here in the audience today, my father who is surely watching with Isa and Guillermo from heaven above, thank you, Papi, I love you and the parents of all my Pedro Pan brothers and sisters represented here by Eladia Gonzalez and Bernardino Madariaga. Similarly, our deepest gratitude goes to Monsignor Walsh, the person that made it all possible, the sisters of Saint Philip Neri represented here by Madre Paulina Montejo and Madre Maria Victoria Ortega, to this noble nation that welcomed us in our hour of need, to the City of Florida City that provided a home for us back then, and to the current Mayor and City Council for the love and support that they have bestowed upon us.

Carmen Valdivia is a director of Operation Pedro Pan Group, Inc., and chair of the Historic Committee. She made these remarks at the Florida Heritage Landmark Dedication Ceremony on Nov. 16 of a site used to house children of Operation Pedro Pan in Florida City.

Read more here: <http://www.miamiherald.com/2012/11/23/v-fullstory/3108492/landmark-for-operation-pedro-pan.html#storylink=cpy>

Ana Rodriguez Soto, has written three beautiful articles for the Florida Catholic about our Marker Unveiling/Pedro Pan Place Ceremony. Here they are:

Tears and memories at Pedro Pan Place

Historic markers erected in Florida City, site of largest camp for unaccompanied minors

Monday, November 26, 2012

Ana Rodriguez-Soto - Florida Catholic



ANA RODRIGUEZ-SOTO | FC

Florida City's mayor and commissioners present a special recognition to Carmencita Romañach and Carmen Valdivia of Operation Pedro Pan Group. From left: Commissioner R. S. Shiver, Commissioner Sharon Butler, Vice-Mayor Avis Brown, Mayor Otis T. Wallace, Romanach and Valdivia.



ANA RODRIGUEZ-SOTO | FC

Representatives of the second and third generations of Pedro Pan unveil the Florida Heritage Landmark in the front of the Florida City apartment building that housed many Pedro Pans in the early 1960s. From left: Diego R. del Pino, his daughter, Paloma del Pino and Eric del Pino, son, granddaughter and son of Florida City alumnus Carmen Valdivia; and Daniel E. Romanach and Raquel Aveillez, son and granddaughter of Operation Pedro Pan Group's president, Carmencita Romañach.



ANA RODRIGUEZ-SOTO | FC

Maria Teresa Gomez Lombardi, left, shares an emotional reunion with Caridad Cesari, daughter of her house parents, Nino and Peluca.

FLORIDA CITY — Maggie Pedroso did not remember much about the house where she lived as a 5-year-old. But she did remember the stoop where “a bunch of red ants bit me all over.”

Her sister, Nancy Pedroso, 10 years older, remembered a bit more: the cafeteria across the street from where Maggie slept; the apartment building further up the block where she lived with the older girls, and whose corner wall served as movie theatre and dance hall for the teenagers; the chapel on the first floor where Masses were celebrated; and the open-air basketball court on the corner.

“All this block were Pedro Pan homes with different foster parents,” Nancy recalled as she walked through N.W. Second Avenue between 14th and 16th streets in Florida City.

It was her first time back in nearly 50 years. She and her sister had left Cuba in 1962, two of more than 14,000 children sent by their parents to the U.S. to avoid communist indoctrination. Placed under the care of the Catholic Church, many of them passed through or lived in the Florida City camp, which became known among locals as Cuban Village. Between 1961 and 1966, it was the largest camp and transit point for the unaccompanied minors who arrived in South Florida under the auspices of the secret program that became known as [Pedro Pan \(Peter Pan\)](#).

On Nov. 16, the alumni of Florida City gathered with other Pedro Pans to celebrate the dedication of a Florida Heritage Landmark on the site, and the renaming of N.W. Second Avenue as Pedro Pan Place. It was the culmination of a 50-year celebration that began on the 50th anniversary of the start of the program — December 1960 — and concluded on the 50th anniversary of the end of the flights — October 1962.

Before receiving proclamations from Florida City's mayor and commissioners, the Pedro Pans walked around looking for familiar sights, shedding tears, and partaking in poignant encounters with former housemates, as well as two of the Sisters of St. Philip Neri who had served as their guardians, teachers and substitute moms.

The Pedroso sisters lived in Florida City for three years, until their parents made their way to the U.S. Maggie now lives in New York and Nancy in Tampa. Nancy remembers the long bus rides to Immaculata La Salle High School in Miami, where she received “a fabulous education.” Maggie remembers Mrs. Mahoney, her teacher at the public elementary school, who took pity on the fact that she could not speak English and made sure never to call on her in class.



ANA RODRIGUEZ-SOTO | FC

Unveiling the new street sign along with Operation Pedro Pan Group's Carmencita Romanach, right, are Florida City's Mayor Otis Wallace, center, Commissioners Sharon Butler and R.S. Shiver, and Vice-Mayor Avis Brown, far right.

“I will always be grateful to her for that,” said Maggie, adding that she learned many lessons from Mrs. Mahoney that she ultimately put into practice in her own classroom.

As she walked around inside the apartment where she lived as a little girl, she tried to visualize 14 bunk beds crammed into the small space — and made futile attempts to hold back tears.

“It seemed like the world was going to end, that there would be no hope, that I would never see my mom again,” she said, recalling one other indelible memory from that time period: President John F. Kennedy’s assassination. “We needed to come back here in order to heal, in order to cry.”

Even so, said her older sister, “We were lucky. We had each other. Our foster parents were great.”

“I just remember the bigger girls combing my hair and dressing me like a doll,” said Maria Teresa Gomez Lombardi, who arrived in Florida City as a 6-year-old and lived in the same house as Maggie Pedroso. She remembered one other thing: the names of her house parents, Nino and Peluca.

She, too, shed tears as she walked around the small apartment. Then she ran into a woman named Caridad Cesari.

“My parents were (Nino and Peluca) her house parents,” said Cesari, who now lives in Tampa and whose younger sister is the same age as Lombardi. The product of an Italian dad and a Cuban mom, Cesari and her sister were Pedro Pans as well. Her sister had come in August, she in October and their parents in November 1961, at which time they became foster parents to other Cuban children.

“I knew I was part of something but I didn’t know what I was part of,” said Lombardi, who now lives in Connecticut. She began investigating in the 1990s, starting with the only words she knew: Catholic Welfare Bureau (now Catholic Charities). She was able to meet Msgr. Bryan O. Walsh, one of the architects of Pedro Pan, in 1996. (He died in 2001). She and her older brother were reunited with their mother in 1966, but she never saw her father again. He died in Cuba. Her wish is to return there “to go see my father in the cemetery.”

“I’m so humbled by these Cuban Americans. Everything they went through, where they are and what they’ve done,” said Lombardi’s husband, Bill. “It’s so inspiring. They know what true freedom is.”

“We’ve always called this area the Cuban Village and I never knew why,” said Otis T. Wallace, Florida’s City’s mayor, recalling how as a kid he used to ride his bike through the neighborhood. “We’re fixing that today,” he said while presenting a proclamation to members of the board of directors of [Operation Pedro Pan Group](#), the non-profit

organization created to reunite the Pedro Pans, to tell the world their stories, and to serve children today who find themselves in similar circumstances.

“You truly represent the best that is America,” Mayor Wallace said. “Since I found out about Pedro Pan, all over the county I’m meeting people who told me they were here,” including a co-worker at Florida City whom he has known for 19 years. “And they are all no excuse-making, productive citizens.”

“Today we stand here as grateful adults,” said Carmencita Romañach, president of Pedro Pan group and a Florida City alumnus by adoption — she and her two younger brothers spent nine days at the camp in Kendall before being relocated with family in Puerto Rico. She noted that the Pedro Pans were welcomed by the U.S., sheltered and protected by the Catholic Church, and given the opportunity to live in freedom and practice their faith.

“We leave a legacy to (our children and grandchildren),” she said, “a legacy greater than any material goods, a legacy of love, courage, resilience and gratitude.”

“Now that legacy of selfless love is theirs to pass on,” said Carmen Valdivia as the children and grandchildren of Pedro Pans — her sons and granddaughter included — unveiled the historical marker placed in the courtyard of the apartment building.

Valdivia chaired the committee that applied for the Florida Heritage Landmark and serves on the board of directors of Pedro Pan Group. She and her husband Guillermo Paz, both architects, spent two years photographing and taking inventory of the buildings that comprised the former camp as part of the documentation for the historical designation. He died after a brief illness this past May.

“Please know that many of us consider this our Ellis Island,” said John Couriel, a Pedro Pan who served as master of ceremonies for the event. And he reminded those present that Pedro Pan children still exist, and they are still being cared for by the Church, through [Catholic Charities’ Unaccompanied Refugee Minors and Unaccompanied Minors](#) programs. The latter are housed in the Msgr. Bryan O Walsh Children’s Village in southeastern Miami-Dade County, the old Boystown site which also housed some of the original Pedro Pans.

http://www.miamiarch.org/ip.asp?op=Article_121126154120227

'Our angels'

Sisters of St. Philip Neri made indelible mark in life of one Pedro Pan girl

Monday, November 26, 2012

Ana Rodriguez-Soto - Florida Catholic



ANA RODRIGUEZ-SOTO | FC

Janet Martinez, center, reconnects with the Sisters of St. Philip Neri from Cuba who cared for the Pedro Pan children at the Florida City camp, Sister Maria Victoria Ortega, left, and Sister Paulina Montejo, who now live at the sisters' convent on the grounds of St. Jerome Church in Fort Lauderdale.

FLORIDA CITY | The sisters left Cuba just a few months before the children.

A group of 40 Sisters of St. Philip Neri who taught at Our Lady of Lourdes School in Havana were among the priests and religious expelled from Cuba when the communist government shut down all the private schools.

Among them were Sister Maria Victoria Ortega and Sister Paulina Montejo, both in their mid-20s. They were among the group of religious who stayed at [St. Jerome Parish and School](#) in Fort Lauderdale, where Sister Ortega and Sister Montejo still work today. But initially they were sent to the Kendall camp for Pedro Pan children, where Sister Ortega remembers having 20 unaccompanied girls in March 1961 — and more than 100 by November.

When the Catholic Welfare Bureau (now Catholic Charities) opened up the larger Florida City camp, both were among the religious sent there to work alongside the house parents.

Janet Martinez remembers them both. She arrived in Florida City in September 1962, at age 16, with her 8-year-old brother, and spent a year at the camp before being sent to a foster home in New Mexico, where they would be reunited with their parents three years later.

“She used to play basketball with the kids and the only thing you could see was the white habit jumping up and down,” Martinez said of Sister Montejo.

“She was the mother that we left in Cuba,” she said of Sister Ortega. “I used to cry a lot. And she saw me one day and showed me a picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (which hung in the chapel). And she said, every time you feel like crying, go and do a good deed. Then take out a pin (from the pin cushion near the image). That will be like taking a pin of pain from your mother’s heart.”

“I still do that. I continue to help people,” Martinez said. The Sisters of St. Philip Neri “were our angels.”

http://www.miamiarch.org/ip.asp?op=Article_121126202458250

'Ask for George'

Now a priest, a former Pedro Pan recalls his departure from Cuba, arrival at Florida City

Monday, November 26, 2012

Ana Rodriguez-Soto - Florida Catholic



ANA RODRIGUEZ-SOTO | FC

From left, Sister Paulina Montejo and Sister Maria Victoria Ortega, two of the Sisters of St. Philip Neri who cared for the children at the Florida City camp, and one of the camp's alumni, Father Enrique Sera, now pastor of St. Joachim Church in Costa Mesa, Calif.



ANA RODRIGUEZ-SOTO | FC

Florida City Mayor Otis Wallace, left, stands next to George Guarch's daughter, Lynn, during the ceremony.

FLORIDA CITY | Father Enrique Sera, pastor of St. Joachim Church in Costa Mesa, Calif., remembers a few things about his departure from Cuba and arrival in the U.S. at the age of 11:

- Spending the 10 “scariest hours of my life” in the “pecera” or “fishbowl,” the area where passengers were screened before their flights departed Havana’s airport — a wait and screening the Pedro Pan children endured alone, as their anxious parents watched and waited on the other side of the glass.
- Meeting a 17-year-old — Ramiro Sigler — who took on the task of caring for him and several younger boys during the wait in the “pecera” and the flight to Miami. When Sigler was taken to a different camp after arriving here, “I felt like I was losing my older brother.”
- Being handed a baby “just as we were leaving” whose relatives had been denied permission to leave. He was told, “Here, his father is waiting on the other side.” Once he got on the flight, he handed the child to the flight attendant, who took over from there.
- Being told to “ask for George,” when he landed in Miami. “That was code for I want to seek asylum,” although there was an actual person, George Guarch, who met the planes and ferried the children to the camps.

Father Sera, along with Guarch’s daughter, Lynn, was among those who gathered at the corner of N.W. Second Avenue and 14th Street in Florida City Nov. 16 for the naming of Pedro Pan Place and dedication of the historical marker that denotes the history of the Florida City camp.

He stayed at the camp for three months before being transferred to the care of Catholic Charities in the Diocese of Yakima in Washington state. Four years later he was reunited with his parents and moved to southern California. In 1978, he became the first priest ordained for the Diocese of Orange.

“I’m very proud to be a Cuban from that period,” he said, noting that the story of Pedro Pan demonstrates “the greatness of Cuban culture ... At that moment, we all rose to the occasion. Everybody, all classes, races, coming together to make sure we landed safely in the U.S.”

Of course, he did not know he was part of Pedro Pan until he read an article in Readers Digest around 1990. “We knew that it was a special program. We knew that it was very surreptitious,” he said. “I knew I had been part of the refugee experience but I didn’t know I was part of Pedro Pan.”

He eventually met Msgr. Bryan O. Walsh, the “father” of Pedro Pan, and the man whose phone number he had been given in case George could not be found. He also reconnected with Frank Angones, Jr., the son of his house parents at Florida City, Francisco and Maria Lidia. But he never met up with Sigler, his young guardian angel on the flight to freedom. He is not sure if he is still alive.

“I’ve always wanted to meet, if he has any relatives left, just to tell them what a wonderful big brother he made,” Father Sera said.

http://www.miamiarch.org/ip.asp?op=Article_121126202458250

Pedro Pan Children Reunite After Five Decades

[South Dade News Leader](#), [Cover Stories](#), [Homestead](#)

By **Julie Schaffter** *Sat, Nov 24, 2012*

Returned to the site of their home-away-from-home from 1961-1966, men and woman hugged and cried as they embraced one another for the first time in decades.

Gathered at the apartment complex on 155 NW 14th Street, dressed in matching blue shirts that read ‘Operation Pedro Pan,’ and sporting badges that showed their pictures from half a century ago more than 50 former Pedro Pan members flocked the street.

Returned to the site of their home-away-from-home from 1961-1966, men and woman hugged and cried as they embraced one another for the first time in decades. Some members wore two badges — one for themselves and one for a friend, or brother, or sister who has since passed away. Some who could not be there were represented by family members.

The dedication ceremony began at 11:20 a.m., nearly an hour later than the proposed start time — one speaker jokingly said he had warned his friends they would be running on ‘Cuban time.’ After the presentation of the flags by South Dade Senior High’s Color Guard and the Pledge of Allegiance, the crowd bowed their heads for an invocation by Reverend Enrique Sera, who was also a child of Operation Pedro Pan.

Mayor Otis Wallace shared opening remarks with the crowd, reminiscing his own experience with what used to be known as the ‘Cuban Village.’

“Most of the citizens of Florida City who still call this the Cuban Village today don’t know of the rich history of Pedro Pan,” he said. “I think today is the beginning of fixing that.”

The crowd clapped and cheered with the final proclamation that November 16th, 2012 would henceforth be known as Operation Pedro Pan Day in the City of Florida City.

John L. Couriel, designated Master of Ceremonies as well as a member of the Pedro Pan Group, agreed with the Mayor's words, and reminded those in attendance that "many of us consider Florida City to be our Ellis Island."

Attendees filtered from the tent and out into the street, where Mayor Wallace unveiled the street sign designating NW 2nd Avenue as Pedro Pan Place. Many held their cameras high in an attempt to capture a piece of history, and as the crowd pressed close, one woman, with tears in her eyes, said to a friend, "It is good to know that we were not forgotten."

Both Carmencita Romañach and Carmen Valdivia, President of Operation Pedro Pan Group and Director of Operation Pedro Pan Group, respectively, stepped forward to share their individual stories of their experiences in leaving Cuba to relocate to Florida City.

They thanked those responsible for helping their vision to become reality with the installation of a Florida Heritage Landmark sign, which shares the history of Operation Pedro Pan, as well as the Florida City camp.

The sign now stands as a testament to all those who once lived in the area known to many as the 'Cuban Village', and a reminder to the citizens of Florida City the role the community played in giving temporary homes to hundreds of children during a time of need and crisis.

"I couldn't think of a greater love a parent could show than to make sacrifice of separation to ensure that their kids would have the gift of freedom and democracy," Wallace stated. To some, the block of NW 14th Street and NW 2nd Avenue will always be a little bit of home.

By [Julie Schaffter](#)

<http://southdadenewsleader.com/issue/south-dade-news-leader/article/pedro-pan-children-reunite-after-five-decades>

Fifty years ago, on March 10, 1962 the Evansville Press published an article by Gene Miller titled: "Cuban Tots, a Raggedy Ann Doll" describing the arrival of 50 Cuban youngsters to Evansville. Gene Miller was the first journalist to report on Operation Pedro Pan, he had published an article on the Miami Herald the day before, March 9, 1962. Coincidentally, an article by Paul Leingang was published in the Evansville Living November/December Issue about some of those Cuban children as we celebrate the Closure of the 50th Anniversary of our Exodus.

Our Pedro Pan connection with Evansville continues..... See article below.

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November/December 2012:

Home for the Innocent

Clandestine Cuban refugee program changed lives in Evansville

by Paul Leingang / photos by Paul Leingang and Berta Parravicini

Fifty years ago, one of the western world's biggest secrets came to an end. The story began in 1960 in Fidel Castro's Cuba. Along the way, Cuban and American families were forever changed.

A story that hit the stands on March 10, 1962, in an Evansville newspaper may have been the first published report about "Operation Pedro Pan," lifting the international secrecy surrounding the clandestine effort. Then, the international turmoil of the Cuban Missile Crisis put an end to the secret operation that sent more than 14,000 unaccompanied children from Cuba to the United States.

Today, the story still is widely unknown, even though it likely was the largest ever influx of minor refugees in the Western Hemisphere.

Cuban families sought to protect their children through the ultimate sacrifice of separation — sending them away from home and Castro's communist principles to dreams of faith and freedom in the U.S.

"We left in the middle of the night, hoping the neighbors wouldn't see us," says Susy Garrandés Rodríguez, who was a child of 10 in 1962 when she arrived at St. Vincent's Orphanage in Vincennes, Ind. After some months at the orphanage, her 9-year-old twin brothers were sent away separately — Antonio to a foster family in Darmstadt, Ind., Jorge to a home in Schererville, Ind.

A few miles south in Evansville, Berta Parravicini and her younger brother Humberto both went to Mater Dei High School but lived with separate foster

families. Berta eventually married Ted Kares of Evansville. Because their firstborn son, Teddy, was born in America, he was able to bring Berta's parents to the U.S. from Cuba.

It took five years for the Parravicini family to reunite. Some families were separated forever. Others, like the Garrandés family, would become part of a historic and troublesome international incident.

Manuel Garrandés, Susy's older brother, took part in the Bay of Pigs Invasion, a 1961 attempt by Cuban exiles to overthrow the Cuban government. He was captured and then imprisoned in Cuba. In an exchange of prisoners with the U.S., Manuel came to America and was able to bring his father with him.

Eventually, the father reunited with his younger children who were "Pedro Pan" kids, Jorge and Tony. Susy stayed at the orphanage until September 1965, when Manuel, who was living in New Jersey, sent for her. She reunited with her mother a month later, but would not see her younger brothers until September 1966 in Miami.

The Great Migration

The name "Operation Pedro Pan" was given to the international refugee movement by Gene Miller, who reported the story 50 years ago in *The Evansville Press*. Miller had been a reporter in Evansville before taking a news job in Miami. He was on a plane from Miami with five of the 50 refugees who came to Evansville.

"This is the underground railway in the sky — Operation Peter Pan," Miller wrote, adding, "Maybe it should be called Operation Pedro Pan."

Miller revealed the story, but not the real names of the children.

"No one is telling exactly how it [bringing the children into America] is done. No one will. The risk of reprisal is too great," he wrote.

The two-time Pulitzer Prize winner died in 2005.

A Catholic priest in Miami, Father Bryan Walsh, and the headmaster of Ruston Academy in Havana, James Baker, initiated the operation. Walsh approached the U.S. government seeking funds to support the effort financially and requesting visa waivers for the children, and so commenced Operation Pedro Pan. Between Christmas 1960 and October 1962 — when the Cuban Missile Crisis brought a halt to the refugee movement — Cuban parents sent 14,048 children to the U.S. Fifty of them, ages 6 to 17, spent a portion of their young lives in Evansville and Vincennes, Ind., changing the lives of local families forever.

Merging Cultures

It is a bittersweet story for Francis and Dorothy Hillenbrand. Francis, at age

91, still lives in an independent apartment at the Little Sisters of the Poor facility in Evansville, and Dorothy now lives in a room with nursing care at St. John's Home for the Aged.

Some of the details are fading from their memories, but the emotional connection they made with Antonio Garrandés and his family is everlasting.

"Monsignor Charles Schoettelkotte [founder of Catholic Charities of Evansville] called one day and asked if we would be interested and willing to take a child from Cuba into our home," says Dorothy.

Tony came into their lives, joining the couple and their eight children in their home near Darmstadt.

Tony's twin brother Jorge was living in Schererville, his sister Susy at St. Vincent Orphanage in Vincennes, and his parents were in Cuba.

"Can you imagine what it was like for a 9-year old boy?" Dorothy asks.

No one in the Hillenbrand household spoke Spanish.

"I tried," says Dorothy. "I bought a book. I think that was one of the things that would have helped Tony. It must have been horrible for that little boy. But I loved him and he seemed to love me."

The two Garrandés boys eventually joined their father in Florida. Jorge died in 2009. Tony lives with his family in Florida, and remains "troubled" by his childhood experience, according to his sister.

But the Hillenbrands keep in touch.

"When the phone rings and it is Susy calling, she just says 'Mom,' and I know who it is," says Dorothy. "She tells her friends about her 'Indiana mom and dad.'"

A Long Way Home

It was a long time ago when Berta flew from Havana to Miami and then to Evansville. "Looking down from the plane, it was very dark and gloomy, and it was beginning to snow," Berta remembers. "I thought, 'My God, where am I coming to?'"

Now, Berta is a wife, mother, grandmother, and successful businesswoman who operates Kares Inc. Painting and Wallpaper in Evansville with her husband Ted.

"I love Evansville," the Cuban native says, but admits, "I hate snow."

During a recent interview, Berta reflected on her life in Cuba, her high school years at Mater Dei, her marriage and family, and her home in Southern Indiana.

She was born and raised in Cárdenas, in the Cuban province of Matanzas, with her brother Humberto; they came to the U.S. in 1962, when she was 16 and he was 14.

“I could never ask for better parents,” says Berta. “We were not rich, but middle class.” When Fidel Castro proclaimed Cuba to be a communist country, Berta’s family, like many others, made the difficult decision to send their children away.

When she came to Indiana, she missed her family, her friends, celebrations of birthdays and Christmas, “dancing the conga in the park,” and the life of a teenager in Cuba.

Foster families were arranged through Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Evansville, with funds provided by the federal government to assist the foster families. Berta began her life in Indiana living with Jack and Florence Pfettscher of Evansville. They spoke no Spanish and Berta spoke no English.

“It was hard,” she says. “Very hard for the family I lived with. But somehow we made it.”

When her foster mother, Florence, went to the hospital to have a baby, Berta tried to help out at the home — even though she had never cooked a meal in her life.

“I boiled hot dogs for a week,” she recalls. Her foster father appreciated her efforts, but finally stepped in and said, “I’m going to fry chicken.” As time passed, the Cuban stranger became more and more familiar with life in Southern Indiana.

Through friends of her foster parents, Berta was introduced to now husband Ted. When she turned 18, she was no longer eligible for financial assistance and made plans to live with her aunt and uncle in California.

“On the day I left to fly to California, Ted proposed to me, and I accepted,” she says.

Ted followed her to California and soon brought her back to Evansville.

Five years after her arrival in America, Ted and Berta celebrated the birth of their first son, Teddy. Her parents, Humberto and Bertha Parravicini, left Cuba for Indiana, where they lived out the rest of their lives with their children and grandchildren.

For general information, history, reunions and activities, see www.pedropan.org.



Berta celebrates her quinceañera (the Latin American celebration of a girl's 15th birthday) on Jan. 9, 1960, with her parents.

Link: <http://www.evansvilleliving.com/articles/home-for-the-innocent#.UKgV-HmZxk4.facebook>

Vail Valley Voices: Grateful for life in the U.S.

by Lino Piedra
Vail, CO, Colorado

(as Published on Vail Daily News, November 22, 2012)

The daily Pan Am flight from Havana to Miami arrived late. Each passenger-unaccompanied minors and a few families-was traveling on a one-way ticket and an exit permit from the Cuban government valid for a 39-day stay in the United States, a requirement that the passengers would honor in the breach. All had very little luggage and no money at all, not even loose change.

Among the children were my brother, 14, and I, two years older. That was 50 years ago.

That flight from Cuba probably was the only one operated by Pan Am, which left empty on its outbound leg but returned full every single day. The unaccompanied children on these flights were there thanks to Father Bryan Walsh, a young priest from the Miami archdiocese who had managed to obtain visa waivers from the State Department for children in Cuba. The actual names would be entered later.

The visa-waiver we had was a sepia-colored copy of the original document, and on it, clearly visible, was the outline of each of the pieces of correction tape previously applied to the dozens of names that had preceded ours.

This arrangement between a Miami priest and Foggy Bottom lasted from mid-1960 until the missile crisis in October 1962, and allowed some 14,000 children to escape Castro's Cuba and gain access to a life in a democratic nation. Father Walsh's great idea facilitated the largest exodus of children in history.

Leaving Cuba was not a simple matter. First, an exit permit was required. Second, an airline ticket had to be purchased, but payment had to be made in dollars even though possession of U.S. currency was illegal. And third, the actual date of departure was arbitrarily decided by the Cuban Ministry of Foreign Relations, which would advise the applicant by telegram one day before the trip.

We knew the process could take from one to six months but that most telegrams were sent after about three months. We kept a count of the days elapsed, and one morning, the tersely worded message arrived.

Not only were we not allowed to take any money with us, but we could only bring clothing for three days, although friends who had already left suggested bringing more because sometimes the exit customs people did not check all that well.

Once at the airport, we said goodbye to our parents, who seemed a lot sadder than I

was, and the lengthy departure process began.

Eventually, we progressed to the runway where a Pan Am DC-4 awaited. But before we could board, we had to present our luggage for inspection to customs officers who were standing behind a very long table on the tarmac.

The officer facing me was not ready, but the one facing my brother started pulling things out of my brother's suitcase, throwing them in a bin and screaming, "You can't take this with you!" as my brother watched helplessly and big tears ran down his cheeks.

After this fellow had left, it was my turn. My inspector just opened and closed my suitcase, making a disparaging comment about his colleague. He then touched his shirt pocket, as if looking for a pen to fill out a form, so I, trying to be cooperative, offered him mine. "You can't take that with you!" he yelled and kept my pen – a small and fortunately last injustice on Cuban soil.

In Miami, a friend of my father met us at the airport, gave us \$2 each and bought us a Coke, the first real Coke I had had in a long time. He wished us luck and left as we headed to join the group boarding the van for Matecumbe, the refugee camp on the edge of the Everglades that would be our temporary home.

One might think that arriving in a foreign country as penniless refugees would be a terrifying experience. But what I recall feeling was exhilaration at the promising future before us and a profound sense of relief as the realization sank in that I no longer faced the emptiness and hopelessness endured by every Cuban who remained under Castro's wretched regime.

Life in the refugee camp was not exactly a bed of roses. The mosquitoes were so large that once, when I tried to send a particularly hefty specimen to my parents, the letter was returned for additional postage.

But we were fine. Within a short time we had located former schoolmates and discovered that one of my father's best friends, a history professor from our home town, worked in the camp's kitchen – a key connection that assured some additional goodies from time to time.

After a few months, we relocated to Marquette, in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, as far from a tropical island as one can get. The local orphanage had enough room for about 20 of us and became our new home. A real bed in a real building was quite a luxury compared to the cot in a tent where I had been sleeping.

After completing my senior year in the local high school, I attended Michigan Tech, one of the top engineering schools in the country. On my first day, I remember walking down the hill behind the orphanage to U.S. 41 with a cardboard box and my small suitcase, hoping to hitch a ride. A family taking their son to the school picked

me up.

When I arrived, I had just \$10 in my pocket and had to part with \$3 almost immediately for a student-activity fee at my dorm. The next day, at the bookstore, I discovered that the books I needed cost \$47. My improvised solution to this cash-flow problem was to tell the store manager that I was there on a special program sponsored by the bishop of Marquette and to send the invoice to Msgr. Gibbs at the orphanage. Two weeks later, Msgr. Gibbs wrote to me saying that the school had mistakenly sent the bill to him. But by then I had a job in the cafeteria and was able to pay the bill myself.

My story is far from unique. Life in a country that guarantees its people the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness – the very rights the Cuban government systematically denies its citizens – does indeed provide opportunities for all.

But our success was not only due to the kindness of the people who welcomed and helped us here. Our families deserve our gratitude for their wisdom and courage. I am much older now than my parents were then, and I realize how difficult their decision must have been.

On this Thanksgiving Day, as we give thanks for our many blessings, I will be especially thankful that my parents made the right decision and let me leave on that Pan Am flight that brought me here 50 years ago. And I will be forever grateful to this great nation that welcomed me and provided the opportunities that allowed me to become the person I am today.

Lino Piedra, a retired auto executive, was a member of the U.S. Delegation to the 61st Session of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights. He divides his time between Vail and Paris. He first skied Vail in 1987.

<http://www.vaildaily.com/article/20121123/EDITS/121129945>

Future Events Calendar:

Saturday, December 15, 2012 at 10 AM - Christmas Breakfast

Place: Las Vegas Cuban Cuisine, 11500 NW 41st. St., Doral, FI

Thursday, December 20, 2012 at 8 PM- Memorial Mass

Place: St. Dominic Catholic Church, 5909 NW 7th St., Miami, FI

Tuesday, January 8, 2013 at 10 AM- Toy Distribution

Place: Centro Hispano Catolico Msgr. Bryan O. Walsh, 125 NW 25 St., Miami, FI 33127

Saturday, January 26, 2013 at 10 AM- Desayuno Martiano

Place: Felix Varela Hall, 3609 South Miami Ave.,FI

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