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I AM A PROUD CUBAN AMERICAN

Herald staff

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Before the sun set on my first day of college, I found myself immersed in a culture dissimilar from the one that I have grown so adjusted to - the Cuban-American community of Miami.

Rooming with an African-American, an Indian-American and an Irish-American led me to conclude that this past year would be the most diverse experience I had confronted in my 19 years.

I began to notice that while in Miami, I would always be considered American, but once outside the city limits, I would always be thought of as Hispanic. Today, I realize this should not have been such a surprise. Before attending college, before being accepted into any educational institution, I had to categorize my ethnicity.

I began to ask myself some questions that could only have come up away from home, away from my usual surroundings, away from my past.

Consequently, my identity was lost and I began to ask myself, "Who am I?"

But, the road to finding myself began with another question: "What would have been of my life had my parents not left Cuba?"

It all began when I fulfilled my historical studies requirement through a course offered on the Cuban Revolution. The years 1959 through 1970 took an entire semester to cover, but how would I learn about what Cuba was today?

I met one afternoon with my professor to discuss what my thoughts were on the course. The meeting ended with me asking: "What can I do? How do I help my people?"

These questions bewilder me till this day, but I will never forget what my professor told me: "Continue to research; the rest will eventually come to you."

I have not been able to organize my beliefs and thoughts well enough to decide what exactly it is that I want to do, but one thing was for sure, I had to visit my real home before I could ever begin to rally my people.

So I did.

Coincidentally, one of my classmates had traveled to Cuba for the past six summers through an organization that runs reality tours throughout the world.

This was my chance, if I was to ever visit Cuba and have the right people to show me what it was that I had to see.

Five months after my course on the Cuban Revolution had ended, I was on a plane to Havana, but before I talk about the trip, you must be aware of certain facts.

Prior to my trip, no other member of my immediate family had been back to Cuba since they departed the socialist nation. On the morning of Aug. 3, 1980, my mother and grandparents left Cuba, leaving their life and everything they had ever loved, known, and come to fear behind.

Boarding *Damasá III*, a shrimp boat, my mother at the age of 17 made the 12-hour voyage to Key West.

I once asked her what she remembered of the journey and she responded: "Nothing, I was seasick the entire time and passed out due to the illness."

From Key West she was transferred to a political prisoner camp in Miami where she was interrogated by immigration agents, vaccinated and sent to a waiting area until a family member could claim responsibility for her.

Not exactly what most Americans envision an immigrant's first hours in the United States of America to be like.

My father's arrival in the United States was not so dramatic. He traveled regularly to the United States with his brothers prior to the revolution in order to compete in swim meets in Miami, but on his first trip the United States after the revolution, he and his brothers never made it back to Cuba. That was 1961.

Forty-one years have passed since my father left his place of birth, but the real story lies behind my mother's 22 years in the United States. It's been 22 years since my mother has seen her aunts, her cousins, her best friend, who now has a husband and two children whom my mother has never met.

But I saw them during my trip, which is best described as informative yet saddening. Part of my time was spent with the tour as we visited some of the most beautiful areas of Havana, areas that my relatives who continue to live in Cuba have not had the opportunity to visit.

The other part of my visit was spent with the family that I have never met. The stories, kisses and love that were shared between us are indescribable, but what I will never forget and is most relevant to this article was said by my mother's best friend's husband.

He told me: ``It's good that you had the opportunity to visit the sites of Cuba, but it is more important that you got to visit your true home, because, you may have been born in the U.S, but your blood, your heritage, your soul is Cuban."

It was then that I found myself for the first time.

I was neither Cuban nor American; I was the best of both worlds, Cuban American.

For those of you who have grown up the way that I have, hearing and learning about Cuba through the stories told to you by abuela and abuelo, I strongly urge you to respect the words of your grandparents but to learn more about it for yourself, for your parents, for a better understanding of who you are.

Ask yourself the question that I continue to ask myself: ``What would have been of my life had my parents never left Cuba?"