LOVE, LOSS AND LONGING
THE IMPACT OF U.S. TRAVEL POLICY ON CUBAN-AMERICAN FAMILIES

JEANNE PARR LEMKAU AND DAVID L. STRUG
PHOTOGRAPHS BY NESTOR HERNÁNDEZ JR. AND JUAN E. GONZÁLEZ LÓPEZ

Latin America Working Group Education Fund  Washington Office on Latin America
To the memory of
Nestor Hernández Jr.

Photographer, teacher and friend
“Hope is everything.”

“La esperanza es todo.”

— Arlene, page 28

Chantilly, VA/Camagüey
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“With the first embrace, we eliminated the distance between us.”

Mario, page 18
Hialeah, FL/La Habana
Wayne S. Smith

Cuban families tend to be extremely close—even if physically divided by the Straits of Florida.

Across the board, U.S. restrictions on travel to Cuba are an affront to the rights of American citizens. They are also counterproductive. We should be encouraging open travel to help create a free flow of ideas, not trying to wall Cuba off. But mistaken though they all are, it is the restrictions imposed in 2004 on the travel of Cuban Americans that have caused the most pain and human suffering.

Cuban families tend to be extremely close—even if physically divided by the Straits of Florida. From the end of the ’70s until 2004, Cuban Americans living in the United States could travel rather freely to Cuba. There was a general license on the books saying they could visit the island once a year. They were assumed to have permission to travel and did not have to apply for written approval. No one checked, so Cuban Americans had the flexibility to respond to family needs and crises the way all other American citizens did. This caused the United States no problems. Everyone was happy.

Everyone, that is, except for a handful of hard-line Cuban Americans who have no need to visit their families because they have little or no family left in Cuba. This small group of hard-line exiles believes there should be no contact at all with the island as long as it is ruled by the Castro brothers. Though few (and declining) in number, they are big donors and therefore politically influential. They pressured the Bush Administration to impose more stringent controls. In June of 2004, it did.

Now Cuban Americans can only visit immediate family on the island and for no more than two weeks once every three years. And they must apply for a specific license to do even that. The Treasury Department defines who is and who is not an immediate family member. There’s no chance of visiting a cousin, even if you were raised together—and certainly not aunts or uncles. Worse, there are no more humanitarian exceptions for family illness or crisis. Thus, if, say, Maria visited her mother in June, but is then told in September that her mother is gravely ill, there is no way she can get an emergency license to be at her mother’s bedside; rather, she must wait another three years and then visit her mother’s grave. That is inhumane! Anyone who would pass such a measure is undeserving of respect.

This collection of photos and narratives flows from an exhibit that has been traveling nationally since May 2006. Jeanne Parr Lemkau, David Strug, Nestor Hernández Jr. and Juan E. González López have captured the pain felt by thousands of Cuban-American families due to U.S. regulations. The narratives, based on interviews conducted by Lemkau and Strug, convey excellent insight into what these families experience.

Separating families by restricting travel is unjust; the suffering inflicted on families, unbearable. This publication documents a dark moment in U.S. history and presents us with the moral imperative to seek a change in policy.

Wayne S. Smith is an Adjunct Professor at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, MD, where he directs the Cuba Exchange Program, and a Senior Fellow at the Center for International Policy in Washington, DC. He was a U.S. foreign service officer for many years and headed the U.S. diplomatic mission to Cuba from 1976 to 1981.
May 2007

It is with great pleasure that I endorse this joint Latin America Working Group Education Fund (LAWGEF) and Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) publication of the "Love, Loss and Longing: The Impact of U.S. Travel Policy on Cuban-American Families" photo exhibit. This new book demonstrates the negative effects of U.S.-Cuba policy, a policy that I have been working to change since I was first elected to Congress.

I would like to commend the photo-exhibit participants for bravely sharing their stories. Their courage has helped us better understand the impact the policy has on Cuban-American families, and their voices have put a human face on the policy. My thanks to the two academics who conducted the interviews and distilled the testimonies, Doctors Iramae Lemkuh and David Sugg.

Forcing Americans to choose between visiting a sick parent and attending a funeral is un-American; redefining the family to exclude cousins, aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews ignores the essential structure of Cuban families; and restricting opportunities to travel to Cuba once every three years forces people to choose between breaking the law or visiting family members in times of need.

The embargo and travel ban have been in place for over forty years and have failed to hasten the end of the Castro dictatorship. The travel ban has only succeeded in preventing academics from engaging with one another, kept people of faith from exchanging with their partners on the island, prohibited American farmers and entrepreneurs from reaping the benefits of trade with the island, and made it impossible for the American people to share our values with the Cuban people.

Separating families, academics, and people of faith is not in our national interest. Now is the time for change. For many years, my colleagues in the Cuba Working Group have led the charge to end the travel ban. It is my hope that in 2007 we will be able to lift not only the restrictions limiting family travel but also the restrictions on all Americans.

Sincerely,

JEFF FLAKE
Member of Congress
May 15, 2007

I support the contributions Love, Loss and Longing: The Impact of U.S. Travel Policy on Cuban-American Families photo exhibit has made to the efforts to end the U.S. ban on travel to Cuba. I commend the Latin America Working Group Education Fund and Washington Office on Latin America; through their national photo exhibit tour, they have put a personal face on the individuals this inhumane policy affects. I also thank the courageous Cuban Americans who have spoken out about this issue. The tour has brought their message to people all across our country.

The travel ban denies ordinary Americans the right to travel to an island 90 miles from our shores, yet we are free to travel to the communist nations of China, Korea and Vietnam. These restrictions on travel are particularly cruel towards Cuban Americans, who have already made the heart-wrenching decision to leave their home country to seek a new life abroad, and have left them in an untenable position. Prohibiting Cuban Americans from traveling to the island creates deep fissures in Cuban society and leaves Cuban Americans in the United States feeling isolated from an important part of their identity, and feeling guilty for being unable to regularly support their families and take part in important family events.

I have long sponsored and supported legislation to end the full embargo. After nearly a half of a century of sanctions, the United States is no closer than it had been on day one to mastering Cuba or causing the removal of its government. Yet Americans cannot enjoy the simple freedom of traveling to Cuba. It is evident that restricting travel and trade is a failed policy that harms the people of Cuba, and works against the promotion of democracy on the island. In this 110th Congress, I have again introduced legislation to end the travel ban and lift the full embargo.

I invite you to read the testimonies in this book and know you will be moved by the love, loss and longing these families experience. I ask you to join me in calling for an end to this heartless policy.

Sincerely,

Charles B. Rangel
Chairman, Committee on Ways and Means
May 10, 2007

As United States Senator from Wyoming, I share the concerns expressed in the photos and testimonies found in this book about families that have been separated and kept apart by the United States ban on travel to Cuba. I believe the ban has been counterproductive, as it has served to weaken family bonds instead of keeping them strong and active. The creators, sponsors, and participants of Love, Loss and Longing: The Impact of U.S. Travel Policies on Cuban-American Families share this message and demonstrate the negative effects of a policy that separates the American people from the Cuban people.

In the days before the new travel restrictions were set in 2004, Cuban-Americans could legally travel to Cuba to visit their families every year, more often if circumstances warranted it. Then, the regulations were changed to require Cuban-Americans to apply for specific licenses whenever they wanted to travel. No longer is it possible to travel to Cuba with a general license. These changes effectively limit Cuban-American family travel to once every three years. The regulations also narrowly define family to limit it to grandparents, parents, siblings and children; and they provide no exception for family or humanitarian emergencies. That prevents Cuban-Americans from returning to Cuba to care for sick relatives, attend family funerals, or even visit their own children more than once in three years.

Clearly this has to change. We have been focused on the same policies toward Cuba for more than 40 years, and they have not worked. They have not made the lives of any of those affected by these policies better -- they have made them worse. When U.S. policies deny Americans the right to travel to Cuba, ties that exist between family members are weakened and Americans are prevented from gaining firsthand knowledge about Cuba and its people. The travel ban hurts both U.S. citizens and the Cuban people. Our best and most effective goodwill ambassadors are the people of the United States.

In the days to come, this will be an issue I will continue to promote in the United States Senate. Working together, I am hopeful that someday soon we will make a new beginning and open the doors to Cuba for all Americans.

Sincerely,

Mike Enzi
Michael B. Enzi
United States Senator
Early in 2005, we were drawn together by our shared concern about the mental health implications of new restrictions governing travel to Cuba by Cuban Americans. Six months earlier, the Bush Administration had approved and implemented regulations that drastically reduced the extent to which Cuban Americans could visit family members on the island. Although we had just met—both of us in Havana doing academic research—we decided to collaborate in a study of Cuban Americans separated from family members on the island. Our goal was to document how individual and family well-being were being affected by the new policies.

Between June 2005 and April 2006, we conducted 53 in-depth interviews of Cuban Americans from families divided by the Florida Straits. Details of our methodology may be viewed in our publication listed in the endnotes.1 Interviews typically lasted an hour or more and were conducted in English or Spanish in interviewees' homes or in private corners of public places. Following a semi-structured format, we asked about details of family history and relationships and explored the psychological and economic impact of the restrictions on the interviewees and their family members. We were stunned by the range and intensity of the personal stories that emerged.

Once our research was underway, we asked for help from the Latin America Working Group Education Fund and the Washington Office on Latin America to extend our contacts with the Cuban-American community. On learning of our project, they suggested that we expand our work by developing a photography exhibit which, in combination with stories from our interviews, could be used for public education. We contacted photographer Nestor Hernández Jr., himself a Cuban American unable to visit Cuba under the new restrictions, and he readily agreed to donate his expertise. Unfortunately, before he could complete all of the photographs, Nestor became terminally ill and we were forced to seek the help of a second photographer. Multi-media artist Juan E. González López came to the rescue, sacrificing time at home with his new baby in order to help other families. Juan finished taking the photographs while respectfully conferring with Nestor to assure the integrity of the final collection. The narratives to accompany each photograph were drawn from our interviews, representing—to the best of our knowledge—the situations of these Cuban Americans at the time.

The exhibit *Love, Loss and Longing: The Impact of U.S. Travel Policy on Cuban-American Families* opened on May 12, 2006, at the Rayburn House Office Building in Washington, DC. Due to his worsening condition, Nestor Hernández Jr. was unable to attend; tragically, he died the next day. Since the Washington opening, the exhibit has traveled nationally and has shown in Arlington and Crystal City, Virginia; Baltimore, Maryland; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Yellow Springs, Ohio; Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Jackson Hole, Wyoming; Newark, New Jersey; Sacramento and Oakland, California; Chicago, Illinois; Cambridge, Massachusetts; New York, New York; and Miami, Florida. Future showings are scheduled for Mobile, Alabama; Dayton, Ohio; and several cities in Illinois.

We offer our heartfelt thanks to all who have supported our research, the development and tour of the exhibit and the writing of this publication. Neither the exhibit nor the book would have been possible without the financial contributions of the Christopher Reynolds Foundation, the Arca Foundation, Oxfam America, the Bruderhof Foundation, and dozens of private donors, many of whom also helped us make contacts with Cuban Americans. We offer special thanks to the Latin America Working Group Education Fund, the Washington Office on Latin America, the Cuban American Commission for Family Rights, the *Alianza Martiana* and the Cuban American Alliance Education Fund.

Most of all, we thank the Cuban Americans who shared their stories with us, some in circumstances where they risked possible retribution for doing so. We honor their courage and thank them for their trust. We appreciate the hospitality they showed us by inviting us into their homes, generously offering us *cafecitos* and *arroz con pollo*, and helping us find our way from one Miami neighborhood to the next. We are in your debt.

Jeanne Parr Lemkau and David L. Strug
June 1, 2007
Cuban families tend to be extremely close—even if physically divided by the Straits of Florida.
In January 1961, two years after the Cuban Revolution ousted dictator Fulgencio Batista, the United States broke diplomatic relations with the island nation and declared that travel to Cuba by U.S. citizens was contrary to the goals of U.S. foreign policy.

Travel restrictions were introduced that have been successively tightened and loosened under different U.S. presidents. Restrictions are enforced through the Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), which prohibits U.S. citizens and permanent residents from spending money in Cuba without OFAC permission; since travel costs money, those who visit Cuba without OFAC permission can be fined for violating the regulations and could be subject to criminal prosecution under the Trading with the Enemy Act of 1917.

There are exceptions to the travel ban. Since the 1970s, Cuban Americans have been allowed to visit family in Cuba under varying conditions. From 1995 through 2004, Cuban Americans were allowed to visit family once a year without applying for a license from OFAC and could apply for permission to travel more frequently in cases of humanitarian need.

In 2004, President George W. Bush’s Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba recommended tightening the travel restrictions.\(^2\) The Commission argued that reducing family travel would decrease the amount of dollars entering Cuba and hasten the end of Fidel Castro’s government.

The restrictions that went into effect in June 2004 include the following:

- Visits by Cuban Americans to family in Cuba are permitted only once every three years instead of once every year;
- Humanitarian exceptions for response to family illness or crisis are no longer allowed;
- Visits are restricted to two weeks and limited to immediate family as defined by OFAC, eliminating the right to visit cousins, aunts, uncles, nephews, nieces, or more distant relatives;
- For all family visits, a written application for licensed travel must be submitted to OFAC and approved;
- The amount of money that may be spent during a family visit was decreased from $167 to $50 per day;
- The amount of money Cuban Americans may carry to Cuba to give to various relatives was decreased from $3,000 to $300; and remittances, not to exceed $300 per quarter, were limited to the immediate family as defined by OFAC.

Restricting the rights of U.S. citizens in the name of promoting rights and democracy elsewhere is duplicitous. The Cuban Government is criticized regularly for its control over the movement of its people and suppression of freedom of expression. While many of these concerns are valid, this book is directed at the hypocrisy and cruelty of U.S. restrictions as they affect the travel of U.S. citizens.
The Cuban-American Family Divided

The reasons that Cuban Americans want to visit their family members are common to all families—to express love, to fulfill their sense of what is right, to give and receive emotional support, to pay back debts of gratitude, to reconcile personal differences, and to consolidate their family and cultural identities.

About 1.5 million Cubans live in the United States. They comprise the third largest Hispanic group after Mexicans and Puerto Ricans. More than a third of these Cuban Americans were born in the United States. The vast majority of the rest emigrated from Cuba in one of four waves that have occurred since the revolution of 1959 that put Fidel Castro in power, their emigration variously motivated by political upheaval, the prospect of economic opportunity, and the desire to join family members already in the United States. Most Cuban Americans—whether born in the United States or in Cuba—still have close and extended family living on the island. Whether in Havana or Hialeah, the Cuban-American family shares a common culture, language and heritage. A dominant value in Cuban-American families is *familismo*, the cultural attitude that places the interests of the family above those of the individual. Cuban Americans typically seek more frequent contact and communication with their relatives than do Anglo Americans. Respect for elders and deceased family members is highly valued, incurring obligations to care for sick and aging family members and to honor the deceased.

Emigrants from Cuba are expected to maintain close contact with relatives on the island, to sustain a positive relationship with their country of origin, and to provide economic assistance to family and close friends left behind. Cuban Americans who grew up in Cuba tend to maintain strong connections with their parents after migration. Bonds of unity and loyalty characterize these families even when separated.

Close ties of family obligation that bridge multiple generations and extend beyond narrow definitions of “family” are typical among Cuban Americans. Who is considered family is not determined by blood relations alone. Biologically distant relations—second cousins, great aunts, step-relatives and in-law relations—may be considered close kin. These relations may evoke strong norms of reciprocity and expectations of support. Similarly, neighbors and friends often represent “fictive kin”—long-term relationships of a family nature.

Travel across the Florida Straits has helped Cuban-American families mend relationships between those who emigrated and those who stayed in Cuba, confront and grieve their losses, and strengthen their connections with their culture of origin. Contact fosters the reintegration of Cuban families which have been painfully divided and promotes the maintenance of the intergenerational relationships that are the essence of Cuban-American family life. When face-to-face contact is denied or the barriers to contact become too burdensome, family dislocations become permanent; and the web of care and reciprocity that strengthens relationships becomes frayed—to the detriment of family members in both the United States and Cuba.

The reasons that Cuban Americans want to visit their family members are common to all families—to express love, to fulfill their sense of what is right, to give and receive emotional support, to pay back debts of gratitude, to reconcile personal differences, and to consolidate their family and cultural identities. But the experience of Cuban-American families is also unique because of the politically-charged environment in which emigration has taken place. Profound losses and separations within these families have occurred in a divisive political context. As Bernal and Shapiro have written, “the story of the Cuban-American family experience must be told as an intergenerational narrative of love, loyalty and longing, within which memory is a highly contested political territory.” The tensions around family ethics and loyalty obligations that characterize relationships within Cuban-American families splintered by geographic separation have been compounded by intra-familial political conflicts that continue to evolve over years. Contact between Cuban Americans and their family members in Cuba creates critical opportunities for reconciliation and restored family unity.

The stories that accompany the photographs on the following pages were drawn from in-depth interviews of Cuban Americans separated from family members in Cuba. Quotes were edited and condensed for brevity and clarity.
Strong families are fundamental to a healthy society, and the proper role of government is to support families as they provide nurture and care across the life cycle and across generations.

The stories shared by the Cuban Americans who appear in this book illustrate the myriad negative effects that are inflicted by the current U.S. restrictions on travel. They keep Cuban Americans from visiting sick or dying family members and from attending the weddings, funerals and special birthdays that mark transitions of the family life cycle. They block opportunities for face-to-face reconciliation among family members divided by geography and politics. And by narrowly and ethnocentrically defining “family” eligible for legal visitation, the U.S. government violates the concept of American family values, ignores how Cuban Americans define their kin, and severely limits their ability to honor their relations and maintain family networks.

By preventing people from freely responding to the needs of their family members, U.S. policies cause unnecessary suffering, violate the human rights of American citizens, and contradict the fundamental mandate of public health—to prevent harm whenever possible.

The restrictions that so egregiously affect Cuban-American families are part of a larger policy that restricts, and in most cases prohibits, contact and dialogue between U.S. citizens and Cubans. Severe prohibitions affect trade, academic exchange, and religious and humanitarian travel, and limit the ability of ordinary Americans to learn about Cuban life and culture. The policy on travel seeks to promote rapid political transition in Cuba through strengthening the 46-year-old U.S. embargo on Cuba, which is largely regarded as a failure. There are real criticisms to be made of Cuba’s restrictions on freedom of speech and freedom of association, and governments committed to international respect for human rights ought to encourage Cuba to change its practices. But a U.S. policy that seeks to impose a specific political agenda on a sovereign nation is arrogant, misguided, and doomed to failure. The embargo has only succeeded in exacting significant costs from the Cuban people, Cuban Americans, and U.S. citizens in general. Freedom to travel to Cuba is essential for restoring the rights of U.S. citizens and providing a healthy exchange of ideas on the island.

Bipartisan political action is imperative if the travel ban is to be lifted. Contact your senators and representative in Congress and let them know you support the right of all Americans to travel to Cuba. The organizations listed below can guide you in steps that individuals and communities can take to end the travel ban for Cuban Americans and all U.S. citizens.

Building a Policy to Restore Family Values and Freedom to Travel

By preventing people from freely responding to the needs of their family members, U.S. policies cause unnecessary suffering, violate the human rights of American citizens, and contradict the fundamental mandate of public health—to prevent harm whenever possible.

Latin America Working Group
Web: www.lawg.org, Cuba policy updates: Go to www.lawg.org and click on e-alerts button.
Email: lawg@lawg.org, Phone: 202 546-7010

Washington Office on Latin America
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María’s family has been criss-crossing the Florida Straits since the 1800s when the countries were linked in the production of Cuban cigars. María came to the United States in 1993 to visit her sister and decided to stay. Her oldest son, two grandchildren and a sister still live in Cuba.

María works hard to make ends meet. She saved enough money to visit her family in Cuba six times between 1997 and 2004. She sends them what she can.

The tightened restrictions burden María financially and emotionally. Now she is forced to miss years in the lives of her grandchildren or assume the added burden of participating in a licensed religious mission that assures legal travel. Sending material aid has become more expensive and complicated. She limits phone contact with her family because each call costs $1 a minute.

“The restrictions … will not change the system there. They simply make us suffer—those on this side and those on that side. We are like a sandwich—on one side the American government and the Cuban government on the other. We get pressed in the middle.”

La familia de María ha estado cruzando los estrechos de la Florida desde los años 1800s cuando los países estaban conectados en la producción de los puros cubanos. María vino a los Estados Unidos en 1993 para visitar a su hermana y decidió quedarse. Su hijo mayor, dos nietos y su hermana todavía viven en Cuba.


Las restricciones endurecidas desgastan a María financieramente y emocionalmente. Ahora está obligada a ausentarse durante muchos años de la vida de sus nietos o asumir el costo agregado de viajar con una misión religiosa licenciada que asegure su viaje legal. El envío de ayuda material ha llegado a ser más caro y complicado. Limita contactos telefónicos con su familia porque cada llamada cuesta un dólar el minuto.

“Las restricciones… no van a cambiar el sistema allá. Simplemente nos hacen sufrir—ése en este lado y aquéllos en aquel lado. Somos como un sándwich—por un lado el gobierno americano y por otro lado el gobierno cubano. Nos exprimen en medio.”
"The restrictions . . . will not change the system there."
Carlos arrived on U.S. shores by raft in 1992 leaving his two young sons behind with their mother. Once employed in the United States, he regularly sent money to Cuba for their support. From 1994 until 2003 he visited his sons every year. In the wake of 9/11, Carlos volunteered for the National Guard. He was deployed to Iraq where he served as a combat medic, attending to Iraqi prisoners and providing backup for U.S. troops.

Naturally, Carlos was eager to see his sons during his military leaves. He did so in 2003. But in June 2004, when he arrived at the Miami airport to make his annual trip, he was told that new restrictions were about to go into effect. He was denied permission to go and had to return to military service in Iraq without seeing his sons. Subsequently, he served in the bloody battle for Fallujah and was awarded a bronze star.

He doesn’t understand how the country for which he has risked his life could forbid him from seeing his children. “If I had lost my life in Iraq without being able to see my boys again, it wouldn’t have been because of the war, it would have been because my Commander in Chief wouldn’t let me see them when I was able to!”

Fighting in Iraq while losing his freedom
Lucha en Irak mientras pierde su libertad

Carlos llegó a las costas de los Estados Unidos en una balsa en 1992 dejando a sus dos hijos menores con su madre en su país. Una vez que fue empleado en los Estados Unidos, regularmente mandaba dinero a Cuba para su apoyo. De 1994 hasta 2003 visitó a sus hijos cada año. En el despertar del 11 de septiembre, Carlos se fue de voluntario para la Guardia Nacional. Fue enviado a Irak donde sirvió como combatiente médico, asistiendo a los prisioneros de Irak y proveyendo apoyo para las tropas estadounidenses.

Naturalmente, Carlos estaba ansioso de ver a sus hijos durante sus licencias militares. Lo hizo en el 2003. Pero en junio de 2004 cuando llegó al aeropuerto de Miami para hacer su viaje anual, le dijeron que las restricciones nuevas estaban a punto de entrar en vigor. Se le negó el permiso de ir y tuvo que regresar al servicio militar sin ver a sus hijos. Posteriormente, sirvió en la batalla de Fallujah y se le premió con la estrella de bronce.

No entiende por qué el país por lo cual ha arriesgado su vida podía prohibirle visitar a sus hijos. “¡Si hubiera perdido mi vida en Irak sin haber visto a mis hijos, no habría sido por la guerra, habría sido por mi comandante en jefe que no me hubiera permitido verles cuando podía!”
When Marisela emigrated to the U.S. in 1992, she left her parents and sister in Cojimar. She planned to help them join her when she became established, but plans changed when both her mother and father developed Alzheimer’s. Marisela’s sister, who was caring for their parents, died unexpectedly; and then her mother fell and broke her hip. Marisela traveled legally to Cuba and cared for her mother until she died.

Marisela was left to arrange her father’s care. She hired round-the-clock help so “Pipo” could stay at home. She sent diapers and medicine and visited him many times each year, always legally.

In June 2004, the restrictions were tightened. She was forbidden to send money to his caretakers because they were not family. She was forbidden to send diapers because they were not “medicine.” She was forbidden to visit for three years since she had just seen him. Deprived of care and unable to understand, Pipo despaired. After six months of not seeing his daughter, he died.

Marisela’s grief is mixed with rage. “In less than three years, my sister, my mother, and my father have been buried in Cuba. I came to this country in pursuit of freedom! How is it that I can’t follow through on something so simple as visiting my father’s grave?”

Marisela, 54
Owner of travel agency/Dueña de agencia de viajes
Hialeah, FL/La Habana

Forced to abandon father
Forzada abandonar a su padre

Cuando Marisela emigró a los Estados Unidos en 1992, ella dejó a sus padres y hermana en Cojímar. Ella planeó ayudarlos para que se reunieran con ella cuando se estableciera, pero estos planes cambiaron cuando su madre y padre se enfermaron de Alzheimer’s. La hermana de Marisela, quien cuidaba de sus padres, se murió inesperadamente y luego la madre se cayó y se quebró la cadera. Marisela viajó legalmente a Cuba y cuidó a su madre hasta que se murió.

Marisela tuvo que arreglar el cuidado de su padre. Contrató a una persona las 24 horas al día para que “Pipo” pudiera quedarse en casa. Mandaba pañales y medicina y lo visitaba muchas veces al año, siempre legalmente.

En junio del 2004, las restricciones las hicieron más estrictas. A ella se le prohibió enviar dinero a los cuidadores porque no eran de la familia. Se le prohibió mandar pañales porque no eran “medicina.” Se le prohibió visitar durante tres años puesto que lo acababa de ver. Privado de cuidado y sin poder entender, Pipo se desesperó. Después de seis meses de no ver a su hija, se murió.

El dolor de Marisela está mezclado con rabia. “En menos de tres años, mi hermana, mi madre y mi padre fueron enterrados en Cuba. Vine a este país en búsqueda de la libertad. ¿Cómo es que ni siquiera puedo hacer algo tan simple como visitar la tumba de mi padre?”
“In less than three years, my sister, my mother, and my father have been buried in Cuba.”
When Jorge was a boy in Marianao, Uncle Pichardo was like a second father. Pichardo picked him up after school each day. Every evening he brought candy home, dividing the pieces equally among his children and his brothers.

One afternoon in 1971, when Pichardo came by with treats to share, he found a padlock on the door of his brother’s home. When the neighbor told him that his brother’s family had left suddenly that morning for the United States, Pichardo became so upset that he threw the candy to the ground.

Jorge was 11 when his father took him out of Cuba. He never forgot Uncle Pichardo. Thirty years later when he returned to his homeland, he was overwhelmed by the sweetness of their reunion. Jorge started visiting Pichardo once or twice each year. On his last visit, in 2003, he learned that his uncle had cancer. Jorge assured him that he would visit again soon; “Whenever you need me, I will come.”

Then the regulations changed. Jorge couldn’t fulfill his promise. And he couldn’t bring himself to tell Pichardo why. “How could I tell my uncle that he just wasn’t important enough—that he wasn’t family?” Uncle Pichardo died, asking “Is Jorge here yet?”

Forced to break promise

Cuando Jorge era un niño en Marianao, el tío Pichardo era como un segundo padre. Pichardo le recogía cada día de la escuela. Todas las noches traía dulces a casa, dividiendo los pedazos por igual entre sus hijos y los de su hermano.

Una tarde en 1971, cuando Pichardo vino a compartir las golosinas, encontró un candado en la puerta de la casa de su hermano. Cuando su vecino le dijo que la familia de su hermano se había marchado de repente para los Estados Unidos, Pichardo se disgustó tanto que tiró los dulces en el suelo.

Jorge tenía 11 años cuando su padre le sacó de Cuba. Nunca olvidó al tío Pichardo. Treinta años después cuando regresó a su patria, se sintió abrumado por la dulzura del encuentro. Jorge empezó a visitar a Pichardo una o dos veces cada año. En su última visita, en 2003, supo que su tío había contraído cáncer. Jorge le aseguró que le visitaría pronto; “Cuando quiera que tú me necesites, vendré.”

Entonces las regulaciones cambiaron. Jorge no pudo cumplir con su promesa y no pudo estar presente con Pichardo para decirle por qué. “¿Cómo le iba a decir a mi tío que no era tan importante, que no era familia?” El tío Pichardo murió, preguntando: “¿Ya llegó Jorge?”
“How could I tell my uncle that he…wasn’t family?”
Cuba felt too small for Marietta. Trained as a musician, she longed for the freedom to explore the world beyond the limits of her homeland. At 21, she emigrated to the United States on the Mariel boatlift, leaving family behind.

For years she worked low-wage jobs. At times she was homeless. “I had a wig and a K-Mart dress and slept on the beach; people didn’t know.” Returning to Cuba to visit wasn’t an option—money was scarce. Besides, her sisters shunned her as a traitor.

Eleven years after Marietta’s departure, her mother died suddenly. Marietta felt compelled to see her family. She returned and found sisters ready to reconcile and a Cuba that welcomed her. She began to visit regularly and to renew her knowledge of Cuban dance. She led educational tours that helped support the Latin American Folk Institute.

Marietta is enraged by the travel restrictions which limit her contact with her 84-year-old father and impede exchange with Cuban artists. She came to the United States for freedom. Now she contemplates moving abroad.

No freedom in the land of liberty
No hay libertad en la tierra de la libertad

Cuba se le hizo muy pequeña a Marietta. Entrenada como músico, ansiaba libertad para explorar el mundo más allá de los límites de su tierra natal. A los 21 años, emigró a los Estados Unidos en el embarque de Mariel, dejando a su familia atrás.

Por años trabajó recibiendo salarios bajos. A veces no tenía casa. “Tenía una peluca y un vestido de K-Mart y dormía en la playa; la gente no sabía.” Regresar a Cuba para visitar no era una opción—el dinero estaba escaso. Además, sus hermanas la habían marcado como una traidora.

Once años después de la salida de Marietta, su madre se murió repentinamente. Marietta se sintió obligada a ver a su familia.

Regresó y encontró que las hermanas estaban listas para reconciliarse y a una Cuba que le daba la bienvenida. Empezó a visitar regularmente y renovar su conocimiento del baile cubano. Lidió viajes de turismo educacionales que ayudaron a apoyar al Instituto de Folklore Latinoamericano.

Marietta está enfurecida por las restricciones de viaje que limitan su contacto con su padre de 84 años y le impiden el intercambio con los artistas cubanos. Vino a los Estados Unidos por la libertad. Ahora contempla mudarse al extranjero.
“I had a wig and a K-Mart dress and slept on the beach; people didn’t know.”
When Javier visited Cuba in 2003, he didn’t know what to expect. He hadn’t been back since emigrating with his family when he was 8. Javier wanted to see his homeland even though he had no close family there.

Cuba took him by surprise. He visited the house in El Vedado where he was born and the church where his parents were married. He found his grandmother’s house in Miramar and was flooded with warm memories. He became reacquainted with family friends and distant relatives. “All of the faded memories of my childhood came back to life. It was like finding the pieces of a puzzle that had been missing for a long time.”

Back in New Jersey and surrounded by his photographs of Cuba, Javier began planning another trip for 2004. He hoped to travel to Sagua la Grande and find the house where his grandfather was born. He hoped to locate descendants of his great uncle still living in that area. Travel restrictions kept him from making the hoped-for trip.

“I am angry and frustrated. It is a violation of my human rights to prevent me from seeing my family. Cuba is the country where I was born; this is my heritage. What does this say about my freedom as an American citizen?”

“A violation of my human rights”

“Una violación de mis derechos humanos”

Cubano, 47
Químico
Westmont, NJ/La Habana

Un violación de mis derechos humanos

Cuando Javier visitó a Cuba en 2003, no sabia que esperar. No había regresado allá desde que emigró con su familia cuando tenía 8 años. Javier quería ver su patria aunque no tuviera ninguna familia cercana allí.

Cuba le sorprendió. Visitó la casa en el Vedado donde nació y la iglesia donde sus padres se casaron. Encontró la casa de su abuela en Miramar y se sintió inundado de recuerdos acogedores. Llegó a reconectarse con los amigos de la familia y parientes lejanos. “Todos los recuerdos esfumados de mi infancia revivieron. Era como encontrar los pedazos de un rompecabezas que se habían extraviado por un largo tiempo.”

De regreso en New Jersey rodeado de sus fotografías de Cuba, Javier empezó a planear otro viaje en 2004. Esperaba viajar a Sagua la Grande y encontrar la casa donde su abuelo nació. Anhelaba encontrar descendientes de su tío abuelo que todavía vivieran en aquella área. Las restricciones le impidieron hacer el viaje anhelado.

“Estoy enojado y frustrado. Esto es una violación de mis derechos humanos, de prevenirme ver a mi familia. Cuba es el país donde naci; éste es mi legado. ¿Qué dice esto de mi libertad como un ciudadano americano?”
"All of the faded memories of my childhood came back to life."
Aidil is an only child. When she was three, she emigrated from Cuba with her parents, leaving seven aunts and uncles and numerous cousins behind. For nineteen years her contact with her family on the island was through letters, phone calls, and shared photographs.

In 1998, Aidil returned to Havana and was reunited with the uncles, aunts, and cousins who had treasured her letters and memories of her as a child. “For the first time in my life, I belonged. I really belonged. I had never had that sense before. I was home.”

Aidil visited her family in Cuba every year thereafter until the 2004 restrictions defined her relatives as ineligible for legal visitation. Even as she grieved the new separation from her own family, she resolved to work on behalf of others. She entered law school in 2005 and plans to use her legal training to fight for the rights of all Cuban Americans.

“I think about all the people I know who have children, parents, siblings and aunts in Cuba, and about my own mother whose brother died there before she could say goodbye. We should all be able to visit family whenever we want or need to…. Some day it will seem preposterous to anyone that the U.S. government ever devised such restrictions.”

So many families affected

Demasiadas familias afectadas

Aidil es hija única. Cuando tenía tres años, emigró de Cuba con sus padres, dejando siete tíos y tías y bastantes primos allá. Por diecinueve años su contacto con su familia en la isla era a través de cartas, llamadas telefónicas, y fotografías compartidas.

En 1988, Aidil regresó a la Habana y se reunió con sus tíos y primos quienes habían atesorado sus cartas y recuerdos de su niñez. “Por primera vez en mi vida, pertenezco, verdaderamente pertenezco. Nunca había tenido ese sentido antes. Estaba en casa.”

Aidil visitó a su familia en Cuba cada año desde aquel momento hasta el año 2004 que las restricciones definieron a sus parientes como ilegibles para una visita legal. A pesar de que ella se afligió por la separación de su propia familia, resolvió trabajar en apoyo a otros. Ingresó en la escuela de abogados en el año 2005 y planea usar su entrenamiento legal para pelear por los derechos de los cubanoamericanos.

“Pienso en toda la gente que conozco y quien tiene hijos, padres, hermanos y tíos en Cuba, y mi propia madre que se le murió su hermano allí antes de que pudiera decirle adiós. Nosotros debemos todos poder visitar a la familia cuando queramos o necesitemos ir… Algún día le va a parecer ridículo a cualquier persona que el gobierno de los Estados Unidos haya ideado tales restricciones.”
“For the first time in my life, I belonged.”
Mario came to the United States with his second wife in 1992. The most painful part of leaving Cuba was the separation from family left behind. His only child, a blind son also named Mario, stayed in Havana with his mother. Now he is 35, married, and a computer professional for the City of Havana library. Recently he became the proud father of Mario senior’s first grandchild. The new baby is named Mario, too.

The eldest Mario used to visit his son several times a year, helping him with home repairs and other tasks around the house. “With the first embrace, we eliminated the distance between us.”

Under the new restrictions, Mario is forbidden to visit his son or to meet his grandson before three years have passed. Mario could petition for his son and his family to join him in the United States but then he would lose his excellent job and his access to much needed medical and social services in Cuba. Mario longs to visit him and meet his only grandson. He feels ashamed that he doesn’t have the courage to violate the restrictions and wonders, “What does it mean to be a good father?”

Kept from disabled son and first grandchild
Separado de su hijo invalido y su primer nieto

Mario vino a los Estados Unidos con su segunda esposa en 1992. La parte más dolorosa de dejar Cuba fue la separación de su familia que dejó atrás. Su hijo único, un hijo ciego que también se llamaba Mario, se quedó en la Habana con su madre. Ahora tiene 35 años, está casado, y es un profesional en computaciones para la biblioteca de la ciudad de la Habana. Recientemente se convirtió en el orgulloso padre del primer nieto de Mario Papá. Al nuevo bebé también lo nombraron Mario.

Mario el mayor solía visitar a su hijo muchas veces al año, ayudándolo a reparar la casa y otros quehaceres del hogar. “Con el primer abrazo eliminábamos la distancia entre nosotros.”

Bajo las nuevas restricciones, a Mario le prohiben ir a visitar a su hijo o ir a conocer a su nieto antes que hayan pasado tres años. Mario podría poner una petición por su hijo y su familia para que se reuniieran con él en los Estados Unidos, pero él perdería su excelente trabajo y su acceso a la medicina y servicios que necesita en Cuba. Mario añora visitarlo y conocer a su único nieto. Él se siente avergonzado que no tiene el valor de violar las restricciones y se pregunta, “¿Qué significa ser un buen padre?”
With the first embrace, we eliminated the distance between us.”
For 45 years, Mari has not returned to Cuba. Until recently she didn’t want to. Now that she does, her government says no.

At 13, Mari’s parents sent her to live with her aunt in the United States, fearing that her opposition to the revolution would bring her harm in Cuba. Like other Peter Pan exiles, she thought the Communist regime would soon fall and that her family would be reunited. But the regime did not fall and her family was fractured by conflict. When Mari left Cuba, the uncle and cousins with whom she had shared every Sunday dinner of her childhood saw her and her parents as traitors to the revolution. Years passed without hope of reconciliation. Her father died, then her uncle. Her mother emigrated. Mari lost touch with her cousins.

Then two years ago, Mari was given the e-mail address of a lost cousin. The network of cousins began to heal the wounds of estrangement through e-mails and phone calls. Now Mari is eager to reconcile with her cousins face-to-face and to meet their spouses and children. She is finally ready to visit Cuba. But cousins aren’t eligible for family visits.

“What are the real family values,” Mari asks, “when we keep families away from each other?”

Por 45 años, Mari no ha regresado a Cuba. Aún recientemente no quería hacerlo. Ahora que lo quiere hacer, su gobierno dice que no.

A los 13 años sus padres la enviaron a vivir con su tía en los Estados Unidos teniendo miedo que su oposición a la revolución le haría daño en Cuba. Como otros Pedro Pan exiliados pensó que el régimen comunista pronto caería y que su familia estaría reunida. Pero el régimen no cayó y su familia fue fracturada por el conflicto. Cuando Mari salió de Cuba, el tío y los primos, con quienes había compartido la comida cada domingo de su infancia, la vieron a ella y a sus padres como traidores de la revolución. Los años pasaron sin ninguna esperanza de reconciliación. Su padre murió, luego su tío. Su madre emigró. Mari perdió contacto con sus primos.

Entonces hace dos años a Mari le fue dada la dirección de un primo perdido. La red de primos empezó a sanar las heridas del extrañamiento a través de correos electrónicos y llamadas telefónicas. Ahora Mari está ansiosa de reconciliarse cara a cara con sus primos y reunirse con sus esposas y sus hijos. Finalmente, está lista para visitar a Cuba. Pero los primos no son elegibles para visitas de familia.

“¿Qué son los valores reales de la familia,” Mari se pregunta, “cuando separamos los miembros de las familias del uno al otro?”
Nestor Sr. left Cuba more than 50 years ago hoping for a better life in the United States. He was 20. He settled in Washington, married and raised six children. Nestor Jr., photographer for this book, was his oldest son. Vicente, who is pictured here, is his youngest.

Nestor Jr. was 18 when he traveled to Cuba and arrived unannounced on his grandmother’s doorstep in Los Pinos. With the embrace of his father’s relatives, he felt he had “come home.” Between 1978 and 2003, he made over 20 trips to Cuba, visiting family, exploring far corners of the island with his camera, and organizing workshops and exhibitions with North American and Cuban photographers.

Vicente traveled to Los Pinos with his father and discovered that his Cuban family was larger than his family at home. Playing with cousins on the streets of Havana he felt safer than on the streets of Washington. After his trip he started asking more about his father’s homeland and began referring to himself as Cuban.

Under the restrictions neither Nestor Jr. nor Vicente could return to Cuba—ever. Their grandmother is deceased and their cousins aren’t eligible for visits as “family.”

Nestor Sr. wonders, “When I die who will take my ashes to Cuba if my sons can’t go?”

“Who will take my ashes to Cuba?”
“¿Quién llevará mis cenizas a Cuba?”


Nestor Hijo tenía 18 años cuando viajó a Cuba y llegó sin anunciarse a la puerta de la casa de su abuela en Los Pinos. Con el abrazo de los parientes del lado paterno se sintió que había “llegado a casa.” Entre 1978 y 2003 el hizo más de 20 viajes a Cuba, visitando a su familia, explorando los rincones de la isla con su cámara, y organizando talleres y exhibiciones con fotógrafos estadounidenses y cubanos.

Vicente viajó a Los Pinos con su padre y descubrió que su familia en Cuba era más grande que su familia en casa. Jugando con sus primos en la calles de la Habana se sintió más seguro que en las calles de Washington. Después de su viaje, empezó a preguntar más acerca de la patria de su padre y empezó a identificarse como cubano.

Bajo las restricciones, ni Nestor Hijo ni Vicente pueden volver a Cuba—jamás. Su abuela falleció y sus primos no califican como “familia” que se permite visitar.

Nestor Padre se pregunta, “Cuándo yo muera, ¿Quién va a llevar mis cenizas a Cuba si mis hijos no pueden ir?”
Silvia’s playground as a child was the Havana Yacht Club. Her grandfather was the vice president of U. S. Standard Oil in Cuba.

Her family supported the Cuban revolution but quickly became disillusioned. When her grandfather learned about a program to send children out of the country to save them from “communism,” Silvia became a Peter Pan exile. Most of her family joined her in the United States within the year.

Silvia married a physician and they have five grown children. She lives very comfortably. But the restrictions keep her from sharing her prosperity with her “child” in Cuba, her second cousin Rafael. She used to visit him several times a year on educational and family licenses, helping him repair his house and supporting him after the death of his baby. Now she has no legal right to visit Rafael or send material support.

“When I see everything my kids have and how successful they have been, I wish the same opportunities for Rafael. No government has the right to keep families from nourishing and helping each other. In that respect, I feel it is my right to visit Cuba whenever I want to—all Cubans are my family.”

“Todos los cubanos son mi familia”

Ella solía visitarlo bastantes veces al año en licencias educativas y religiosas, ayudándole a reparar su casa y apoyándolo después de la muerte de su bebé. Ahora no tiene derecho legal para visitar a Rafael o mandarle apoyo material.

“Cuando veo todo lo que mis hijos tienen y que exitosos ellos han sido, deseo las mismas oportunidades para Rafael. Ningún gobierno tiene el derecho de impedir que las familias se alimenten y se ayuden los unos a los otros. En esa estimación, siento que es mi derecho visitar a Cuba cuando quiera porque todos los cubanos son mi familia.”
"No government has the right to keep families from nourishing and helping each other."
Pulled between two countries, two languages, and two versions of “home,” Juan identifies with the hyphen in Cuban-American. His parents, sister, and nieces live in Pinar del Río while he and his wife live in Ohio with their baby—Camila, named after the Cuban hero Camilo Cienfuegos.

In 1992, Juan chose exile in the United States rather than the prospect of imprisonment in Cuba for his role as an artist in the human rights movement. It was eleven years before Cuba allowed him to go back. He returned to visit his family in 2002.

Juan is eligible to apply for another visit and has struggled with the best use of the one trip rationed to him for a three-year span. Last year, his father became seriously ill and required surgery. At the same time Juan’s wife was pregnant with their first child. Forced to make a difficult choice, he gambled that his father would weather the surgery and decided to visit his parents after the baby was born. Thankfully his father recovered.

Having fought for human rights in Cuba, Juan considers his situation ironic. “Now the United States is violating my rights. I have no choice but to become a dissident again.”

Juan, 47

Visual artist/Artista visual
Yellow Springs, OH/Santiago de Cuba

Difficult choices
Decisiones difíciles

Dividido entre dos países, dos lenguas y dos versiones de “hogar”, Juan se identifica con el guión entre ser cubano y americano. Sus padres, una hermana y sus sobrinas viven en Pinar del Río, mientras él y su esposa Paloma viven en Ohio con su bebe—Camila, nombrada por el héroe cubano Camilo Cienfuegos.

En 1992, Juan eligió el exilio en los Estados Unidos en vez de la posibilidad del encarcelamiento en Cuba por su papel como artista vinculado al movimiento de derechos humanos. Estuvo once años antes de que Cuba lo dejara regresar. Finalmente volvió a visitar a su familia en 2002.

Juan es elegible para otro viaje que le está permitido dentro de ese periodo de tres años y ha luchado para usarlo de la mejor manera posible. El año pasado su papá estuvo gravemente enfermo y requirió cirugía. Al mismo tiempo, su esposa estaba embarazada con su primera hija. Forzado a hacer una decisión difícil, Juan apostó que su papá iba a sobrevivir ese momento y decidió visitar a sus padres después de que naciera la bebé. Afortunadamente su papá se recuperó.

Después de haber trabajado a favor de los derechos humanos en Cuba, Juan considera su situación muy irónica. “Ahora es la negación de mis derechos en los Estados Unidos. No tengo otra salida que volver a ser un disidente.”
“Now the United States is violating my rights.”
Lene (left), her aunt Arlene (right), and her mother Jacquelín (in the small photo) share the joys of their unusually close family. They also share the pain of separation. Lene—named for her aunt—lives with Arlene while studying to become a teacher. Her mother, Arlene’s only sister, remains in Cuba.

As a child in Camagüey, Arlene cared for her baby sister Jacquelín and even named her—after Mrs. Kennedy. At 11, Arlene was allowed to travel to Spain to study. Later she decided not to return to Cuba but to settle in the United States. She was 25 and her “baby sister” was 15 before the Cuban government would allow Arlene to visit Cuba. Between 1979 and 2004, Arlene visited Jacquelín in Cuba every year but one. After each visit, Jacquelín became depressed, but the sisters took comfort in planning their next reunion, just a year away. “Hope was everything,” Arlene explains. “Now, with the new restrictions there is no hope. How do you plan for three years when so many things can happen?”

Jacquelín has become despondent. Arlene has developed hives and stomach problems from the stress. “I will go to Cuba, however I have to,” she insists. “The family is more powerful than any law.” Meanwhile, she holds Lene close.

“A Hope is everything”

“La esperanza es todo”
The family is more powerful than any law.
Manolo is ill. He has had cancer and radiation. He has a cardiac arrhythmia and an inoperable aortic aneurism which could kill him at any moment. He lives alone. He doesn’t want to die alone.

In 1962, Manolo came to the United States, leaving two young sons with their mother in Havana. He stayed. In 1979 when he first returned to Cuba to visit, Manolo got to know his sons as men. They now have children—his only grandchildren.

For years, Manolo lived in the United States very independently, only rarely returning to the island to see family. Whereas in Cuba he had been a ballet dancer, in the United States he picked tomatoes, cleaned offices, and worked as a handyman. He married and divorced but never had more children.

Manolo wants to return to Cuba to spend more time close to his children and grandchildren. But he traveled to Cuba in 2003 and during the three years he has had to wait, his health has deteriorated. Now he’s not sure he is healthy enough to make the trip. “If I travel and I die in the process,” he consoles himself, “at least I will be buried in Cuba.”

**Manolo, 82**

Retired / Jubilado

Miami, FL / El Vedado

Manolo está enfermo. Tiene cáncer y ha recibido tratamiento de radiación. Tiene una arritmia cardiaca y un aneurisma de la aorta inoperable que podía matarlo en cualquier momento. Vive solo. No quiere morir solo.

En 1962 Manolo vino a los Estados Unidos, dejando a sus dos hijos con su madre en la Habana. Se quedó. En 1979 cuando por primera vez regresó a Cuba para visitar, Manolo conoció a sus hijos hechos hombres. Ellos tienen ahora hijos—sus únicos nietos.

Por años Manolo vivió en los Estados Unidos muy independientemente, solamente regresaba raramente a la isla para ver a su familia. Mientras que en Cuba había sido un bailarín de ballet, en Los Estados Unidos el piscó tomates, limpió oficinas y trabajó como un criado para tareas diversas. Se casó y se divorció pero nunca tuvo más hijos.

Manolo quiere regresar a Cuba para pasar más tiempo cerca de sus hijos y sus nietos. Pero el viajó a Cuba en 2003 y durante tres años ha tenido que esperar, su salud se ha deteriorado. Ahora no está seguro si está lo suficientemente saludable para emprender el viaje. “Si viajo y muero en el proceso,” se consuela, “por lo menos me enterrarán en Cuba.”
If I travel and I die in the process, at least I will be buried in Cuba.
As a young woman in Cuba, María married a widower with two small children, Caridad and Mario. She raised them to adulthood as her own. They were both grown and married when María visited the United States in the early nineties and decided to stay.

Caridad and Mario now have grown children of their own, and María is a proud grandmother of six. She used to visit her children and grandchildren in Cuba several times a year. Even the anticipation of travel to see them lifted her spirits. “What I like to do best when I visit,” María shares, “is to just be in the house with all of my family.”

Now, María is forbidden from visiting her children or grandchildren—ever. After the new restrictions went into effect, María received a letter from OFAC informing her that since she had not legally adopted her children, she could not legally visit them.

María takes medicine for anxiety and depression and talks to a therapist about her distress. The family separation is making her health problems worse. “Going to Cuba was my life. Now they’ve taken that from me!”

Can never visit her children
Jamás puede visitar a sus hijos

Cómo una mujer joven en Cuba, María se casó con un viudo con dos hijos pequeños, Caridad y Mario. Los crió como sus propios hijos hasta que fueron adultos. Ambos habían crecido y se habían casado cuando María visitó los Estados Unidos a principios de los noventa y decidió quedarse.

Caridad y Mario ahora tienen sus propios hijos crecidos y María es una abuela orgullosa de seis. Solía visitar a sus hijos y nietos en Cuba varias veces al año. Aún la anticipación del viaje para verlos le levantaba su espíritu. “Lo que más me gusta hacer cuando visito,” María comparte, “es estar en la casa con mi familia, nada más.”

Ahora, a María se le ha prohibido visitar a sus hijos y a sus nietos—nunca jamás. Después de que las restricciones nuevas fueron puestas en efecto, María recibió una carta de la OFAC informándole que como ella no había adoptado a sus hijos no podía legalmente visitarles.

María toma medicina para la ansiedad y la depresión y habla con un terapista de su aflicción. La separación de la familia está empeorando sus problemas de salud. “¡Ir a Cuba era mi vida! Ahora me han arrebatado eso de mí.”
“Going to Cuba was my life. Now they’ve taken that from me!”
Marlene is the single mom of Liam who is 4. Her mother who lives in Cuba is the only grandparent Liam knows. He is permitted to visit her only once every three years. Marlene wants more for her son. “I want his grandmother to be more than a photograph.”

Marlene worries about her mother who has been ill and has little family in Cuba to help her. She is 74 and cares for Marlene’s sister who is disabled. Both of them depend on Marlene for emotional support. Marlene used to visit them in Guantánamo every year. Now she cannot.

Her mother needs an operation but is too frightened of surgery to proceed. Marlene thinks that her mother would have the surgery if Marlene could be there to support her and care for her sister during her mother’s convalescence. But Marlene fears that if she travels to Cuba before three years have passed—and is caught and charged—she could lose custody of Liam.

“The restrictions make criminals out of people who just want to see their families.”

Marlene es una madre soltera de Liam quien tiene 4 años. Su madre que vive en Cuba es la única abuela que Liam conoce. Se le permite visitarla una vez cada tres años. Marlene quiere más para su hijo. “Quiero que su abuela sea más que una foto.”

Marlene está preocupada por su madre quien ha estado enferma y tiene una familia pequeña en Cuba para ayudarla. Ella tiene 74 años y cuida a la hermana de Marlene que está incapacitada. Ambas dependen del apoyo emocional de Marlene. Marlene solía visitarlas a ellas en Guantánamo cada año. Ahora no puede.

Su madre necesita una operación pero tiene mucho miedo a la cirugía para proceder. Marlene piensa que su madre tendría la cirugía si Marlene pudiera estar allí para apoyarla y cuidar de su hermana durante la convalecencia de su madre. Pero Marlene tiene miedo que si viaja a Cuba antes de que se cumplan los tres años—y es sorprendida y enjuiciada—podría perder la custodia de Liam.

“Las restricciones hacen criminales de la gente que sólo quiere ver a su familia.”
"The restrictions make criminals out of people who just want to see their families."
Roberto came to the United States with his wife and son in 1980. His two other children stayed behind, a son who is now 54 and a daughter who is 42. He has three grandchildren in Cuba.

As a journalist, Roberto can legally travel to Cuba. He visits his family while there. He volunteers at a Miami radio station in part to maintain access to his family. Still, the restrictions bother him deeply. As an outspoken critic of the restrictions, he fears that if he applied for the license required to make a family visit, he might be denied because of his political views.

Roberto is offended at the thought of having to ask permission to go to his own country. “If my granddaughter is going to be 15 and the party is in Havana, it is my right to go. That’s the way I see it.”

He also objects to the government’s deciding who “family” is. “I cannot send a belt to a cousin because a cousin is not family… I am very upset because they pick who is my family and who is not. My family is my family! Nobody has the right to tell me who is my family and who is not.”

“They pick who is my family!”
“¡Escogen quien es mi familia!”

A Roberto le ofende la idea de tener que pedir permiso para ir a su propio país. “Si mi nieta va a cumplir quince años y la fiesta es en la Habana, es mi derecho ir. Ese es el modo como yo lo veo.”

También objeciona que el gobierno decida quién es “familia”. “No puedo mandar un cinturón a un primo porque un primo no es familia… Estoy muy enojado porque éste escoge quién es mi familia y quién no es. ¡Mi familia es mi familia! Nadie tiene el derecho de decirme quién es mi familia y quién no es.”
If my granddaughter is going to be 15 and the party is in Havana, it is my right to go.”
After Luisa left Cuba when she was six, she rarely saw her two aunts who stayed behind, but through her mother she has always felt strongly connected to them.

Luisa’s mother is now 85 and lives in North Carolina. Two years ago, her mother’s oldest sister died. Her other sister, Yara, lives in Cienfuegos with a great niece. She is alert but fragile at 92. Luisa’s mother longs to visit Yara to see that she is being cared for and to touch her once more, but she is physically unable to make the trip. Luisa would like to go in her stead.

“I want to visit my aunt, as mother would if she could, to carry messages of support and love. But under the new restrictions, only my mother has the right to go. If I could travel, it would give my mother consolation and allow her to know the true situation rather than live with an imagined one.

“My mother finds comfort through prayer, and continues—as she has for 45 years—to write her sister each week. Yet I know there is lost sleep and nights when she wonders, ‘Did Yara have dinner tonight? Did they give her medicine? Is she cold?’”

Can’t comfort elderly mother

No puede consolar a una madre anciana

Después de que Luisa salió de Cuba, cuando tenía seis años, raramente veía a sus dos tías quienes se quedaron allá, pero a través de su madre, ella se había sentido fuertemente ligada a ellas.

La mamá de Luisa tiene ahora 85 años y vive en Carolina del Norte. Hace dos años su hermana mayor falleció. Su otra hermana Yara vive en Cienfuegos con su nieta sobrina. Ella está alerta pero frágil a los 92 años. La mamá de Luisa ansía visitar a Yara para ver que esté siendo cuidada y poder estrecharla una vez más, pero físicamente no puede hacer el viaje. A Luisa le gustaría ir en su lugar.

“Quiero visitar a mi tía como mi madre lo habría hecho si ella pudiera, para llevarle mensajes de apoyo y amor. Pero bajo las nuevas restricciones solamente mi madre tiene el derecho de ir. Si yo pudiera viajar le daría a mi madre consolación y le permitiría conocer la verdadera situación en lugar de vivir una imaginada.

“Mi madre se consuela a través de la oración y continúa—como lo ha hecho por 45 años—escribiendo a su hermana cada semana. Todavía yo sé que ha perdido el sueño cuando ella se pregunta, ‘¿Habría comido Yara anoche? ¿Le habrán dado su medicina? ¿Tendrá frío?’”
Nidia sits alone in front of her husband’s favorite chair, now empty. Máximo died suddenly after a brief illness a month before this photograph was taken. The worry that they shared about their family in Cuba, she now bears alone.

In 1997, Nidia won the emigration lottery that allowed her and her husband to come to the United States. Their children David and Loraina remained in Cuba with their spouses. In 2002, their son David became seriously ill with kidney disease. He was put on renal dialysis. Eager to see David and Loraina and their two grandchildren, Máximo and Nidia flew to Cuba in July 2004, planning a three-week visit. The new restrictions went into effect during their trip and they were ordered to return home after just four days. David was so upset at their departure that his blood pressure sky-rocketed and he was hospitalized.

Now David awaits a kidney transplant, but a second illness—hepatitis C—has left him too ill to risk the surgery. His wife struggles to care for him and their daughter while Nidia worries helplessly from afar.

Before Máximo died, he pleaded. “The Cubans always help everyone. Can’t others help us now?”

“Help us now!”

“¡Ayúdenos ahora!”

Nidia sits alone in front of the silla favorita de su esposo, ahora vacía. Máximo murió de repente después de una breve enfermedad un mes antes de que esta fotografía fuera tomada. La preocupación que ambos compartían de su familia cubana, ahora la lleva sola.

En 1997, Nidia ganó la lotería de emigración que le permitió a ella y a su esposo venir a los Estados Unidos. Sus hijos David y Loraina permanecieron en Cuba con sus esposos. En 2002, su hijo David llegó a estar seriamente enfermo del riñón. Se le puso en un tratamiento de diálisis. Ansioso de ver a David y Loraina y sus dos nietos, Máximo y Nidia volaron a Cuba en julio 2004, y planearon una visita de tres semanas. Las restricciones nuevas se pusieron en vigor durante su viaje y se les ordenó regresar a casa después de cuatro días de estancia. David estaba tan enojado de su salida que su presión arterial subió tantísimo que se le hospitalizó.

Ahora David espera un transplante de riñón pero su segunda enfermedad—hepatitis C—lo ha dejado demasiado enfermo para arriesgar una cirugía. Su esposa lucha para cuidar a él y a su hija mientras Nidia se preocupa sin poder hacer nada desde allá.

Antes de que Máximo muriera, imploraba. “Los cubanos siempre ayudan a todo el mundo. ¿Pueden otros ayudarnos ahora?”
The Cubans always help everyone. Can’t others help us now?”
Eva (in the center) was raised in the United States hearing about her father’s childhood on a sugar farm and her mother’s school-days in El Vedado. Her parents had emigrated from Cuba before she was born.

When she was 22, Eva visited Cuba, driven by curiosity. She found her father’s childhood home. She took pictures of the ceramic tiles that her mother had treasured in her family’s house and made rubbings of family gravestones to share with her grandfather in Miami. Her Cuba experience was so compelling that she became the coordinator for a university educational exchange.

Eva encouraged her parents to visit Cuba with the exchange and watched them reconnect with their homeland after four decades. Traveling with her parents, seeing Cuba through their eyes and listening to their stories increased Eva’s pride in her heritage. Through the educational exchange, Eva frequently visited Cuba with family members. Both of her sons were conceived in Cuba; both were baptized there.

Eva’s family has no close relatives on the island. When educational exchanges were curtailed in 2003, she lost legal access to Cuba. She longs for it to be otherwise. “I want to see my parents walking with their grandchildren in Cuba and showing them their world.”

Sharing Cuba builds family pride
Compartiendo Cuba edifica el orgullo familiar

Eva (en el centro) creció en los Estados Unidos, escuchando de la infancia de su padre en un rancho de cañaverales de los días cuando la madre asistía a la escuela en El Vedado. Sus padres habían emigrado de Cuba antes de que ella naciera. Cuando tenía 22 años, Eva visitó a Cuba, manejada por la curiosidad. Encontró la casa de la infancia de su padre. Tomó fotografías de los mosaicos que su mamá había atesorado en la casa de su familia y calculó las lápidas seculpulares para compartirlas con su abuelo en Miami. Su experiencia en Cuba fue tan apremiante que ella llegó a ser la coordinadora del intercambio educacional para la universidad.

Eva alentó a sus padres visitar a Cuba con el intercambio y observó su reconexión con su patria después de cuatro décadas. Viajar con sus padres, ver Cuba a través de sus ojos y escuchar sus historias, aumentó el orgullo de su herencia. A través del intercambio cultural, Eva visitó frecuentemente a Cuba con miembros de la familia. Ambos de sus hijos fueron concebidos en Cuba; ambos fueron bautizados allá.

La familia de Eva no tiene parientes cercanos en la isla pero cuando el intercambio educacional fue suspendido en 2003, perdió acceso legal a Cuba. Ellá anhela para que esto sea lo contrario. “Quiero ver a mis padres caminando con sus nietos en Cuba y mostrándoles su mundo.”
I want to see my parents walking with their grandchildren in Cuba and showing them their world.
When he was 16, Leandro was detained by the Havana police as a suspected homosexual. He was offered the choice of spending three years in prison or leaving the country for Peru or the United States. He chose to emigrate to the United States on the Mariel boatlift.

Leandro grew into adulthood living with relatives in the United States, but he never stopped missing his family in Havana. The Cuban government forbade the “Marielitos” from visiting their homeland until the early 1990s. Once Cuba permitted him to visit, Leandro traveled each year to see his family.

When Leandro visited Cuba in August 2004, his elderly parents were both well, but soon after he returned to the United States, his father became ill with cancer. Because of the new restrictions, Leandro was unable to return to Cuba when he was most needed. He couldn’t be with his father during his radiation treatment. He couldn’t help care for him during his final days. He couldn’t comfort his mother at his father’s funeral. He experienced his father’s illness and death only by telephone.

Although Leandro loved his father deeply, he finds it hard to cry. This puzzles him. Without the chance to say goodbye face-to-face, his father’s death doesn’t feel quite real.

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Missed father’s funeral
Ausente en el funeral de su padre

Cuando él tenía 16 años fue detenido por la policía de la Habana bajo sospecha de ser homosexual. A él le dieron la opción de pasar tres años en prisión o salir del país a Perú o a los Estados Unidos. Él escogió emigrar a los Estados Unidos en el embarque de Mariel.

Leandro entró en la madurez viviendo con parientes en los Estados Unidos, pero nunca dejó de extrañar a su familia en la Habana. El gobierno cubano prohibió a los Marielitos visitar su patria hasta el principio de la década de los 90. Una vez que Cuba le permitió visitar el país, Leandro viajó cada año para ver a su familia.

Cuando Leandro visitó a Cuba en agosto del 2004, sus padres ancianos estaban ambos bien, pero tan pronto como regresó a los Estados Unidos, su padre se enfermó de cáncer. Debido a las nuevas restricciones Leandro no pudo regresar a Cuba cuando se le necesitaba más. No pudo estar con su padre durante su tratamiento de radiación ni pudo cuidarle en sus últimos días. No pudo consolar a su madre en el funeral de su padre. Él experimentó la enfermedad y la muerte de su padre solamente a través del teléfono.

Aunque Leandro amaba a su padre profundamente, le cuesta mucho trabajo llorar. Esto le desconcierta. Sin haber tenido, frente a frente, la oportunidad de decirle adiós, la muerte de su padre no la siente tan real.
When Raisa’s parents told her they wanted their ashes taken to Cuba once they both died, she knew she would honor their wishes.

Raisa came to the United States with her parents in 1962. By the time her father died in 2002 and her mother in 2004, there were no family members in Cuba to qualify for a legal family visit. To fulfill her parents’ wishes, Raisa, her husband, her brother and three children pursued travel with a religious group and disposed of the remains of their loved ones amidst the obligations of their tour.

Raisa carried the ashes in her camera case. Her family was met in Cuba by her godfather, aunts, cousins and friends. They celebrated mass at the church where her parents had married, then traveled to Guanabo where they gathered on the beach and shared memories of her parents. At dusk, surrounded by family and friends, Raisa and her brother mixed their father’s ashes with their mother’s and, with ashes and flowers, waded into the waters.

Burdened during time of grief

Raisa llevó las cenizas en el estuche de una cámara. Su familia fue reunida en Cuba por su padrino, tíos, primos y amigos. Celebraron misa en la iglesia donde sus padres se casaron, después viajaron a Guanabo donde se reunieron en la playa y compartieron sus recuerdos. Al anochecer, rodeados de la familia y amigos, Raisa y su hermano mezclaron las cenizas de su padre con las cenizas de su madre y flores y las esparcieron en las aguas.

El tener que bregar con las restricciones agobió a la familia de Raisa durante su estado de aflicción. Raisa cree que, “El gobierno está jugando con los sentimientos de la gente.”
“The government is playing games with people’s feelings.”
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DAVID L. STRUG is Professor of Social Work at the Wurzweiler School of Social Work of Yeshiva University in New York City. He holds degrees in social work, anthropology and public health. He has conducted anthropological research in the Andes and Mexico. In the United States, he has conducted social work research, often with Hispanic populations. He has published articles on HIV/AIDS, Hispanic access to social services, social work in Cuba, and substance abuse. He is co-editing a book, The Cuban Health Care System: An Enduring Model, and has edited Alcohol Interventions: Historical and Socio-cultural Approaches. Dr. Strug practices psychotherapy in New York City and can be contacted at strug@yu.edu.

The narratives that accompany the photographs have been translated by VICTOR GARCÍA, Professor Emeritus of Spanish Literature at Antioch College. Assistance with translation was provided by Jayden Sparenborg and Yessy González. Editorial assistance was provided by Paloma Dallas and staff members of LAWGEF and WOLA.

NESTOR HERNÁNDEZ JR. was a Washington, DC, Cuban-American photographer who practiced and taught his craft at the Capital Children’s Museum, the DC Public Schools and the CentroNía multicultural learning center. In 2002, the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities honored him with an “Outstanding Emerging Artist” award. His work frequently took him abroad. In “Cuba Reflections: A Photographic Journey” he documented his travels to the island between 1978 and 2004. Until the 2004 restrictions ended his access to Cuba, he worked to link U.S. and Cuban photographers through cultural exchanges, exhibitions and workshops. In Mali, he developed “Visual Griots,” a workshop linking American and Malian photographers with primary school children. The U.S. tour of the Malian children’s photos culminated in an exhibit at the Smithsonian Institute in 2007. Hernández exhibited regularly; and his images are included in permanent collections and publications in Cuba, Ghana, Mali and the United States. He died in May of 2006 after a brief illness. He was 46 years old.

JUAN E. GONZÁLEZ LÓPEZ is a Cuban-American multi-media and performance artist based in Yellow Springs, Ohio. He was one of the first generation of artists born and educated in Cuba after the revolution. Although his work achieved early acclaim in Havana, his provocative images quickly evoked strong opposition. In the 1980s, he was one of the founders of “Art-de” (arte y derecho /art and rights), a group of young artists whose performances were intended to foster dialogue about human rights and freedom of expression. His participation evoked government sanction, and he was expelled from the artist’s union. Facing the prospect of imprisonment, he chose exile in 1991. Since arriving in the United States, his art has focused on the cultural contradictions and political falsehoods of his adopted country. His work has appeared in numerous exhibits and is included in permanent collections in the United States, Latin America and Europe.

The Latin America Working Group Education Fund (LAWGEF) is one of the nation’s longest-standing coalitions dedicated to foreign policy. The LAWGEF and its sister organization, the Latin America Working Group, carry out the coalition’s mission to encourage U.S. policies towards Latin America that promote human rights, justice and peace. LAWG represents the interests of over 60 major religious, humanitarian, grassroots, and policy organizations to decision makers in Washington and provides reliable guidance to policymakers who want their decisions to be grounded in human rights. For more information, log onto www.lawg.org.

The Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) was founded in response to the brutal military coup d’ état against Chilean President Salvador Allende in 1973 and has played a key role in all major Washington policy debates over human rights in Latin America since. WOLA seeks to foster human rights, democracy and social and economic justice in Latin America, and a U.S. foreign policy that contributes to the achievement of those goals. For more information, log onto www.wola.org.
References:


Note on Cover Photograph:

Julie, 85, was unable to visit her 88-year-old brother, Gabriel, when his health was failing, nor could she attend his funeral after his death in October 2005. She has two siblings still in Cuba, whom she fears may die before she is eligible to see them again.

Photograph Credits:
The following photographs were taken by Nestor Hernández Jr.: Julie, Maria del Carmen, Marisela, Jorge, Mario, Mari, Nestor Sr., Arlene, Maria, Marlene, Roberto, Luisa, Nidia, Leandro. The following photographs were taken by Juan E. González López: Marietta, Javier, Aidil, Silvia, Juan, Manolo, Eva, Raisa. The photograph of Carlos was taken by Washington Post photographer Sora Devore for her friend Nestor. Rick Reinhart took the photograph of Nestor Hernández Jr. that appears on the dedication page.