OPERATION PEDRO PAN

IN THE EARLY 1960S, 14,000 CUBAN CHILDREN WERE SPIRITED TO THE UNITED STATES

IN AN EXODUS SO SECRET MANY OF THE CHILDREN, NOW GROWN, ARE ONLY LEARNING THE

WHOLE STORY TODAY

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Author: By Maya Bell of The Sentinel Staff

His sheltered world began to close in long before that ominous night on the basketball court. In the two years since Fidel Castro had marched triumphantly into Havana, he watched the show trials on TV and flinched at the photos of those shot by firing squads.

The stability of his own Sagua la Grande, where his grandfather once served as mayor, where his father was a veterinarian, where his mother babied him, where everybody knew his name, was dissolving before his eyes.

He witnessed people in the town square cower and cover their heads after Mass, warding off sticks and chains wielded by revolutionary thugs unhappy with the message from the pulpit.

He recognized the bewilderment of farmers forced off the land that their families had tilled for generations. He endured his own pangs of displacement when the government closed and occupied the Catholic school he regarded as a second home, when priests had known all his life were expelled from the island.

But it was the basketball game against the visiting Santa Clara High School team that forever altered his life, confused his identity, rewrote his history and that of the United States. There, on the Sagua La Grande basketball court, some of the machine-gun toting Santa Clara fans focused their intense displeasure on Melquiades Martinez.

The mob wasnt angry that the center who towered over teammates and rivals could do no wrong, that every shot he took fell through the net. Instead, they focused their rage on the Catholic badge of devotion they spotted under his white and blue-trimmed jersey.

Get the one with the scapular! they yelled. Hes Catholic! Kill him!

No blood was let that night, but in the stands, Martinezes parents froze in dread. The senior Melquiades Martinez and his wife, Gladys, knew they could not count on their son to keep his faith or his opposition to the revolution to himself. He had been taught to be forthright, to stand up for what he believed.

The couple realized the time had come to hearken to the whispers of an underground operation spiriting children out of Cuba. The U.S. Catholic Church, it was said, was shielding young exiles under its wing. The Martinezes made their decision. With blind faith and deeper pain, they sent their 15-year-old son away.
He flew on the wings of Peter Pan, joining the largest exodus of unaccompanied children in the Western Hemisphere.

Mel Martinez is sitting behind a mahogany desk in his tasteful College Park law firm. He is the image of success at 49, a prominent attorney and president of the Orlando Utilities Commission.

Studying pictures a friend snapped of him shortly after his arrival in the United States, he is struck by his own face. It is the spitting image of his oldest son, John.

A big man with broad shoulders, black hair and a gentle manner, Martinez marvels that John is almost the same age he was when he left Cuba alone. He cant fathom doing what his parents did, sending his young and tender boy to a foreign country, not knowing when or if he would come back.

Yet like Martinezs parents, the parents of more than 14,000 Cuban children blindly dispatched their sons and daughters to the United States after Castro betrayed the revolution and embraced communism. Frightened and alone, the children began arriving at Miami International Airport the day after Christmas 35 years ago. Two-thirds were teen-age boys like Martinez, but there were also boys and girls as young as 6 and, occasionally, a baby.

They were sent by parents who feared communist indoctrination and were sponsored by a U.S. government bent on aiding the underground movement and showcasing the failures of the Castro regime. Both believed the arrangement would be brief, maybe a few months, certainly no more than a year. After all, the United States would not tolerate a communist stronghold 90 miles from its shores. Already, the CIA was training Cuban exiles in Guatemala for an invasion of their homeland.

Clutching baseball mitts and dolls and shouldering adult burdens, the unaccompanied children arrived day after day three, five, 10, on planes also jammed with fleeing adults. The numbers soared after the Bay of Pigs invasion ended in debacle in July 1961. Finally, after 23 months, the October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis brought the world to the brink of nuclear war and slammed the escape route shut.

Newsmen christened the exodus Operation Pedro Pan, Spanish for the boy who could fly. But unlike the fictional character who never grew up, many of the children of Operation Pedro Pan lost their childhoods on the 50-minute flight to Miami. Indulged and sheltered in Cuba, they landed in the United States stoic and confused, buoyed only by the last words of their parents: Be strong. Work hard. Learn English. This is only temporary. Well be together again soon.

The promise was born of false hope.

Trapped by clashing ideologies and the confluence of history, the majority of the children remained separated from their parents for years, many for decades, some forever.

Half of 14,000 children settled in the States with relatives or friends often people who were still strangers. The other half, including Martinez, were entrusted to Miamis Catholic Welfare Bureau, headed by a young Irish priest to whom the U.S. State Department had bestowed an extraordinary power: a magic wand that waived any Cuban child between 6 and 16 into the United States.
Initially confined to refugee camps in Dade County, the scatterlings were later spread among foster homes, orphanages, group homes and boarding schools from Spokane, Wash., to Sparkill, N.Y. About a dozen settled in Orlando.

When their families were at last reunited in the United States, they could not easily pick up where they had left off. Some were unable to communicate with their parents. They had forgotten Spanish. Others rejected their mothers and fathers, electing to remain in the surroundings they had come to think of as home, with people who had helped them become Americans.

For most, the roles of parent and child reversed. While apart, the children rarely shared their misery. They wrote only cheery letters home. When together again, they became their parents keepers, serving as translators, helping them find jobs, guiding them through the new culture they had found so shocking years before.

Now grown, many of the children of Operation Pedro Pan, including Martinez, just recently learned its name. Many of them, like Martinez, are high achievers: Octavio Visiedo, superintendent of schools in Dade County; Ralph Sanchez, founder of Miamis Grand Prix; Willy Chirino, renown salsa singer; Cesar Calvet, first vice president of SunTrust Bank, Central Florida.

Some are journalists writing books, professors winning research grants, psychologists earning their dissertations, all searching for answers to the many questions that remain unresolved.

For years, they repressed their grief, going on with their lives until something unearthed the buried memories. For two men, talking to a reporter for this story unleashed tears held back for decades. For many others, the true impact of their experience hit them when their own children reached the age they were when they left Cuba.

For Maria de los Angeles Torres, TV footage of Vietnamese orphans arriving in the United States in 1974 revived her own painful journey from Cuba at age 6. A political science professor at DePaul University and recipient of a prestigious MacArthur Foundation grant, Torres, 40, is researching the origins of Operation Pedro Pan.

Like a lightening bolt, a class assignment jolted Yvonne Conde, 45, a free-lance journalist in New York. Reading Joan Didions book Miami, she was floored by a passage about the operation. Recalling her own arrival at age 10, she realized she had been part of an exodus she had never heard of. She is now writing a book.

Mel Martinez caught up with his past while running for lieutenant governor in 1994. On a ticket with Republican candidate Ken Connor, he spent time in Miami trying to woo Cuban voters to the Connor camp. One morning, his travels took him to the Versailles Restaurant in Little Havana, where other Pedro Pan alums regularly gather for breakfast and talk about the most pivotal experience in their lives.

The conversation reminded Martinez of the where-were-you remembrances of John F. Kennedys assassination. Everybody at the table recounted every detail about their arrival the time, the date, the flight number, the loneliness, the trauma, the uncertainty.
But most children of Operation Pedro Pan have little idea of its scope or place in history. Elly Chovel, 48, a Vietnam War widow and Miami real estate agent, is trying to change that. She founded Operation Pedro Pan Group to document the exodus, organize forums like the Versailles breakfasts, stage national conferences and locate other children of Pedro Pan. So far, her group has found only 1,700 of the 14,000.

To this day, few know that, before it ended, Operation Pedro Pan involved a cadre of educators, the silence of journalists, a handful of foreign governments, several Florida and U.S. agencies, scores of child welfare organizations, 56 Catholic dioceses and thousands of families in Cuba and America, including dozens in Central Florida.

This is a healing process, says Chovel, who was sent to Buffalo at age 14. We are obsessed with why, with what happened, with who did what. We have to put all this experience in the right context to get to the next step: How are we going to heal our country?

Father Bryan Walsh knew he had a problem in November 1960. As the second anniversary of Castros ascension neared, the streets of Miami were awash with Cuban refugees. Most were penniless and hungry. Many were unaccompanied children destined to land on Walshs doorstep.

One man already had come to the Catholic Welfare Bureau seeking foster care for a boy sent to Miami by relatives unable to feed another mouth. Walsh could read the anguish on the 15-year-olds gaunt face. The same month, a Cuban mother brought her two children before a Key West judge and convinced him to find them homes.

Walsh knew this was only the beginning. He helped Dade County officials secure $1 million from the federal government to assist the children. Jewish and Protestant agencies agreed to seek homes for the relatively few kids of those faiths. Walsh assumed responsibility for the Catholic children.

He had no idea his commitment would grow so big, so quickly. Neither did the federal government. By 1967, the tab for the Cuban childrens program reached almost $29 million.

Back in Havana, James Baker, director of an American school where foreign embassy officials sent their children, faced the opposite problem. Half of Ruston Academys students were the sons and daughters of Cuban professionals, many of whom were involved in the anti-Castro underground. Desperate to safeguard their children while they worked to topple Castro, they dispatched Baker to Miami to open a boarding school.

At the time, Baker recalls, Castros indoctrination program was in high gear. Children were being sent to the countryside, ostensibly to teach illiterates. There, however, the government was busy breaking down family influence.

Children were taught they owed their parents nothing, that they were a product of a moments pleasure, says Baker, now 88 and retired in Volusia County. I remember children made to march in the street, answering this chant: Who is your leader? Fidel! Who is your hero? Fidel! Who is is your God? Fidel!
In Miami, Baker learned of Walshs efforts to care for Cuban children. The two agreed to work together. They estimated that 200 children of the underground would leave Cuba. Baker would raise their airfares from U.S. executives of Cuban-based companies waiting out Castros reign in Miami. Walsh would meet the children at the airport and resettle them.

The U.S. State Department, committed to the underground movement, promised to make 200 student visas available at the U.S. Embassy in Cuba. But on Jan. 3, 1961, the U.S. broke diplomatic relations with the island, closing its embassies and consulates there. Suddenly, Cubans had no place to secure a visa. Operation Pedro Pan seemed doomed only days after it started.

The State Department soon summoned Walsh to Washington to offer an extraordinary solution. The 30-year-old priest, who a year later would be elevated to monsignor, was handed blanket authority to issue visa waivers to any Cuban between 6 and 16. Any child who had one would be admitted to the United States. The only question was: Would Castro let them go?

The whole refugee policy at the time was based on building up a refugee colony in Miami that would be the base of the counter-revolution, says Walsh, now 65 and still head of Catholic charities in Miami. Basically it was, if you can take care of my children, I can work in the underground.

The fill-in-the blank waivers were smuggled into Cuba in diplomatic pouches of friendly nations. A secret committee distributed them. A key member was Penny Powers, an English teacher at Bakers school and no stranger to international intrigue. During World War II, the British native, who still lives in Cuba, helped smuggle Jewish children out of Nazi Germany. Enfeebled by a stroke and old age, she gets around today in a wheelchair sent by the group of Pedro Pan alums.

Powers network included two political notables: Ramon Mongo Grau and his sister, Polita, the nephew and niece of a three-time Cuban president. Later, the siblings would pay dearly for their anti-revolutionary ideals. They respectively spent 22 years and 14 years in Castros prisons.

Now 73, Mongo Grau lives in a West Dade efficiency filled with commendations and memories of bolder times. In Cuba, he lived with his uncle across from the headquarters of G-2, Cubas security forces. He kept the visa waivers in a closet, inside his daughters knapsack, with alcohol and matches. If the G-2 came calling, Grau planned to smash the bag and light it afire.

He never had to. For some reason Cuban officials never interfered with the flood of children who were leaving Havana a puzzle that is still a source of much debate today. Many scholars and children of Pedro Pan believe the exodus was Castros first Mariel, a precursor to the 1980 boatlift when he threw open the port and let the discontented go. If children left, surely their parents would soon follow, taking the opposition with them.

The young refugees were subjected only to la pecera, the fish bowl, a glass enclosure at the Havana airport where the children of Pedro Pan met their first test.

After tearful goodbyes with their families, the children were isolated in the glass office. Guards bullied them over their destinations and picked through their baggage. Agonizing glances passed through the glass between parent and child.
It was daylong harassment, Martinez recalls. A guy in army fatigues called us up one by one, then sent us back to our seats. They told me I had to settle my phone bill. I told them I was a kid; I didn't have a phone bill. I remember my uncle shoving a wad of bills in my hand so I could leave.

Walking up the steps of the plane, young Mel Martinez turned to see most of his family and closest friends on the airport terrace, waving goodbye. The only person missing was his father, who could not bear to make the sorrowful trip from Sagua la Grande. It took all of Martinez's strength to board the plane.

When the flight finally took off, he shrouded his grief by taking responsibility for a 10-year-old girl. She also was traveling alone. Soon, a stewardess voice broke the tension.

You have just left Cuban airspace, she announced. You are free.

Everybody cheered.

Upon arriving at Miami International airport, Martinez and the other children were told to ask for George. Most presumed it was a code word, but George was really Jorge Guarch, a Cuban-American businessman with a deep, booming voice and a special way with kids.

Now deceased, Guarch often recounted how he and immigration officials fudged the documents of young men and women too old to be admitted. Someone would accidentally spill coffee or burn a cigarette on the paperwork, then alter their birth dates. Some mothers actually sent newborn babies.

On the Feb. 6, 1962, evening that Martinez landed in Miami, Guarch and his cohorts were overwhelmed. Forty children had arrived on various flights that day, so Martinez waited hours with other older boys before being taken to Camp Matecumbe. The rustic religious retreat south of Miami had become one of three processing centers for unaccompanied Cuban children in Dade County.

Arriving too late to be assigned a cabin, Martinez fell asleep on a cot in the dining room. He woke up to chaos, and great despair. Hundreds of boys wandered in a daze. This wasn't the great American adventure he'd imagined, nor the lovely Catholic boarding school he'd envisioned. This was not Never-Never Land.

It was surreal, Martinez recalls. I didn't know anybody. Nobody knew me. Worst of all, nobody cared about me. I was nothing but a number. For the first time in my life, I was nobody.

Martinez spent 40 dismal days at Matecumbe, suffering from homesickness, finding solace only at daily Mass. He wrote his parents nearly every day, never letting on how miserable he was.

A month after Martinez's arrival, the Cleveland Plain Dealer got wind of the exodus and refused to honor the news blackout that had kept Operation Pedro Pan a secret for 16 months, presumably from Castro. Father Walsh and U.S. Welfare Secretary Abraham Ribicoff acted to deprive the paper of a scoop. They released the bare details to the nation on March 7, 1962:

8,000 Cuba Children Saved From Castro Brainwashing, screamed The Miami Herald headline the next day.
Ribicoff issued a nationwide appeal for families to shelter the children. Hundreds responded, most seeking girls. Few wanted the teen-age boys who made up the bulk of the exodus. So on March 16, Martinez, like so many others, was transferred to another shelter: Camp Saint Johns near Jacksonville, where he knew two friends waited. He was so elated he wouldn't let the boys of Matecumbe toss him in the pool, a ritual whenever someone left the gloomy camp. He jumped in himself.

An old estate on the banks of the rural St. Johns River, the new camp was no picnic. Yet some of the 90 boys had been there for months, and were relatively settled. Martinez's chums, Cesar Calvet and Miguel Leorza, now a retired Navy health care administrator who recently moved back to Jacksonville, made life bearable.

So, too, did a young social worker recruited from a Massachusetts hospital to run the camp. His name was Tom Aglio, and he arrived filled with trepidation. I remember being intimidated by the camp, the size of it, the boys, the language, recalls Aglio, now 64 and director of Catholic Social Services for the Diocese of Orlando. I was frightened by the unknown and the awesome responsibility to these boys. Was I up to it?

Aglio got his answer the June day he rang the camp bell for the last time, gathering the boys for a tearful farewell. With weeks turning into months and the months into a year, Archbishop Joseph Hurley had decided the camp was not suitable for growing boys. They needed foster families, and it fell to Aglio to find them.

With tears streaming down his face, Aglio told the boys he understood their anxiety. He knew how difficult it was to be uprooted yet again, how painful it was to break the new ties that had replaced family. He promised them one day they would realize this change was for the best.

Sobbing themselves, the boys jumped to their feet, clapping rhythmically, chanting Aglio's name repeatedly. In a few short months, he had become their padre segundo, their second father.

Tom the angel is what we called him, recalls Julio Nunez, an anesthesiologist in Puerto Rico who cried at the memory. He was love with two legs and two arms. He made us feel like that camp in the middle of nowhere was home.

By now an old hand at being displaced, Martinez was still petrified when he arrived at the Greyhound bus station in Orlando. So were Julio Nunez, Cesar Calvet, Miguel Leorza and the handful of other boys assigned to foster families in Orange County. Most knew just a few words of English. They felt like untethered balloons, uncertain and vulnerable.

Meeting Martinez at the bus station with her two sons, Eileen Young soon put the boys fears to rest. She and her husband Walter, who appropriately lived on Amigos Avenue in Pine Hills, were warm, kind-hearted people who Martinez came to recognize as a real American family.

Martinez would move yet again, but not by his or the Youngs choice. The family had to make room for an elderly relative. Martinez ended up in the Rio Pinar home Jim and June Berkmyer, a childless couple who already had cared for Calvet before he turned 18 and moved to New York. Martinez came to cherish the Berkmyers as much as he cherished the Youngs. To this day, the three families share a bond.
June Berkameyer Brewer, since widowed and remarried, still laughs when she recalls how Martinez delicately explained his fathers work artificially inseminating cows in Cuba. He marries cows, Martinez told her. Later, she would help Martinez find a job for his father at T.G. Lee Dairy.

As time passed, Aglios promise proved true. The boys adjusted to their families. They mastered English, made new friends, caddied at the country club, worked at the library, learned the value of a dollar. They were becoming Americans.

Martinez measured his own transition between homecomings at Bishop Moore High School, where all the Cuban boys went. His first homecoming, Martinez spent alone in his room, crying, not quite sure what homecoming was. The following year, he was on the homecoming court and co-captain of the baseball and basketball teams.

Though in the warm folds of caring families, the boys were still pained by the uncertainty that increased with the rising tensions between Cuba and the U.S. Four months after their arrival in Orlando, President Kennedy and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev squared off over the stockpiling of Soviet missiles in Cuba.

Leaving her dentists office in Sagua la Grande, Martinezs mother Gladys saw the long tubes under the tarps of a convoy of passing trucks. She went home heartsick, believing Cuba would soon be at war with the United States and she would never see her sons again. By this time, Martinezs younger brother, Ralph, had come to the United States with relatives.

Khrushchev blinked and the missiles were removed, but the crisis prompted a policy change devastating to the children of Pedro Pan. U.S. officials abandoned the strategy of fomenting immigration to showcase the failure of the Cuban revolution. Instead, they shut the door to Cuban refugees, hoping to increase pressure on the island and spark an internal revolt. Visa waivers were no longer magic tickets. Operation Pedro Pan was over.

Three years passed before President Johnson began admitting Cubans again. With an emphasis on family reunification, many of the parents of the children of Pedro Pan were given first priority.

Some didnt recognize their children when they landed in the United States. Miguel Leorza used to tease his mother about not knowing him when he rushed to greet her after two years apart. Recounting the story recently, he let go the tears he had held for too long.

Other parents are to this day unable to talk about the separation. Julio Nunezs mother, who didnt see her son for seven years, weeps quietly on the phone. I dont want to remember, the Miami pediatrician says.

Mel Martinez was a 19-year-old junior college student when his parents arrived in Orlando in 1966.

He gave his father, who died this past August, the $322 he had saved from after-school and summer jobs. It was enough to buy an old Chevy and rent a house, and time for Martinez to move out of the Berkameyer home.

When his parents came, I was happy for him, remembers June Brewer, who until now had no idea what she had been part of. But it broke my heart.
The pain of Operation Pedro Pan had come full circle.

PHOTO: (Cover) Thousands of Cubans sent their children to America fleeing Castro. Little did they know that some wouldn't see their parents again. PHOTO: An unidentified Cuban boy salutes the first American flag he sees as he lands at Miami International Airport. Behind him is a young woman refugee and Jorge Guarch, who met many of the unaccompanied children as they arrived. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE FAMILY OF JORGE GUARCH PHOTO: Monsignor Bryan Walsh. JOE RAEDLE. PHOTO: Although eventually re-united with their families, Orlando-ans Mel Martinez (above, at right) and Cesar Calvet remain close to the people who sheltered them, including June Berkemeyer Brewer (above center).GEORGE SKENE/THE ORLANDO SENTINEL PHOTO: The three are pictured at right with Edmundo Perez, another Pedro Pan refugee. PHOTO COURTESY OF CESAR CALVET. PHOTO: Children leaving Cuba were told to ask for George at the Miami airport. George was Jorge Guarch (above, with unidentified children), a volunteer with the Catholic Welfare Bureau who kept a log of the thousands of children sometimes whole families he helped process. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE FAMILY OF JORGE GUARCH PHOTO: (Log of children and families). PHOTO BY JOE RAEDLE PHOTO: James Baker. GEORGE SKENE/THE ORLANDO SENTINEL PHOTO: Many of the arriving teen-agers were crammed together at Saint Johns Manor, a Catholic retreat near Jacksonville. Mel Martinez stretches out on his bunk; Cesar Calvet sits just below Martinez. PHOTO COURTESY OF CESAR CALVET. PHOTO: Fearful that the picture might get back to Cuba and somehow endanger his parents, Mel Martinez ducked down when it was taken at Saint Johns Manor only the top of his head is visible (back row, 3rd from left). Pictured with the boys are Cuban exiles who worked at the camp and Tom Aglio, in suit). PHOTO COURTESY OF CESAR CALVET. PHOTO: Tom Aglio. GEORGE SKENE/THE ORLANDO SENTINEL

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