‘DREAM’ TURNED INTO A NIGHTMARE

Miramar man among the first to leave Cuba as part of Operation Pedro Pan

By Christiana Lilly
STAFF WRITER

When Mrs. Cooper’s car would roll up in front of the house, the younger children hid.

At 17, Eddie Dulom was one of the oldest boys in the house and tried to coax the little ones out from under the bed. Mrs. Cooper was from a local orphanage, and she would take the Cuban children in until their parents could come get them.

“When you’re lonely, you’re desperate,” Dulom said.

They were among the thousands who came to the United States through Operation Pedro Pan, a movement organized by the Catholic Church to get children out of Cuba after the rise of Fidel Castro in 1959. Starting in December 1960, more than 14,000 children traveled alone to Florida, some waiting years to be reunited with their parents. Dulom waited almost seven years.

Dulom lived in the United States for five years, but he and his mother moved back to Cuba when he was 7. He grew up in Havana’s El Vedado neighborhood and enjoyed playing basketball and watching American programs such as “The Adventures of Rin Tin Tin.” His family owned a bakery and a Laundromat and was not very religious.

When Dulom was in high school, Castro overthrew Fulgencio Batista. He promised change in Cuba, and many people were excited to see what he would do.

“A lot of people were just in a dream over this guy,” Dulom said.

That dream became a nightmare for many. Churches and schools were shut down and life became militarized. Dulom’s father left for Spain, where he died in a car accident.

Dulom’s mother feared that he would be forced into military service, so she decided to send him to Florida through Operation Pedro Pan. Leaving in January 1961, he was one of the first to get out. “Nobody thought it was a permanent thing,” he said.

Dulom remembers crying during the plane ride but little else about the trip. When he landed in Miami, he was interviewed by a nun who decided to send him to Monsignor Bryan Walsh.

“Monsignor was probably the only fa-
Dulom lived with Walsh and about a dozen boys in Casa Carrion in Brickell, named after the house parent. It was across the street from the former Academy of the Assumption Catholic all-girls school, where the boys ate every day. As the second oldest, he was considered one of the adults in charge of caring for the younger boys in the house.

"Obviously, all the kids were just devastated," he said. "I had to do a lot of the helping because I could understand English better than some of the kids."

Maurice Ferré, who later served as Miami's mayor, donated and renovated the house, filling it with bunk beds for the boys to sleep in. They were also hiding places for boys hoping to avoid Mrs. Cooper. Dulom remembers a 12-year-old, Jorge, who would zip under the bed. Another boy who was sent to live in New York wrote a letter asking to come back.

"It's like a brotherhood. I never had a brother, but these guys to me were like my brothers," Dulom said. The "brothers" often played pranks on each other. Someone would turn off the light while they showered or threw cold water on them when they least expected it. Dulom also served as an authority figure to get the boys to stop spying on the all-girls school.

As one of the older Pedro Pans, Dulom accompanied Walsh on many of his trips to the camps, including Camp Florida City, a place he describes as "a wall of kids." The Catholic Welfare Bureau leased the space and was licensed to hold 700 children. The camp was a place that children younger than 12 stayed until they could be put elsewhere.

Dulom remembers the children becoming a big family, where the older kids were protective of the younger ones. It was on these trips that he learned many of the values he holds today, such as empathy, respect, and right and wrong.

There also are memories he'll never forget. He saw Walsh cry over a toddler who died of meningitis.

"I remember that for life, because I couldn't imagine him crying," he said.

Christmas time was "unbearable" for Dulom since it's when he missed his parents the most. He received a letter from his mother about once a month, but it didn't make up for her absence at his high school graduation. However, Walsh is in his photos, being a parent to him and the thousands of other children he helped.

"The way he looked at the kids and the way he worried about them, he was really dedicated to his place in life," he said.

After about a year at Casa Carrion, the boys were moved to St. Raphael's Hall, where five house parents were each in charge of 12 children. Dulom graduated from Archbishop Curley-Notre Dame High School and eloped in Portland when he was 19. Looking back, he said he was lonely and "wanted the family life in the worst way."

His mother finally was able to come to the United States in 1967. He already had a son by that point.

"When I saw my mother and grandmother, I didn't know who to hug first," he said, remembering he didn't want to offend either one. "It was like if I hadn't seen them for two days, except my heart had been broken for so many days."

Dulom and his wife had three boys, but she left the family when they were young.

Now living in Miramar, the retired retail salesman has not returned to Cuba and doesn't plan to as long as Castro is still in power. He keeps in touch with his "brothers," and they all ask themselves the same question: could you send your children away like our parents did?

"I talk to the guys and that's the question we all ask," he said. "I don't know if I could have."

Christiana Lilly can be reached at cilly@tribune.com.