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CUBAN REFUGEE CHILDREN

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My initiation into the world of unaccompanied refugee children came very shortly after my appointment to Catholic Charities in September, 1955. Little did I know that this special world would become one of the most profound and most enduring influences in my own life.

At our office in Miami, we received a referral from one of our pastors. An elderly Italian American couple had come to him in panic. A few days earlier, this childless couple had accepted into their home two ten year old Italian war orphans and the two youngsters had turned their lives into a nightmare and were literally wrecking their beautiful home.

The children had been placed, without any home study or local contact by a national Catholic refugee agency, of which there were several at that time. The couple had simply responded to an appeal to open up their home.

My action was to call the agency in New York. The first response was that we, a very small agency, which could not cope with local needs, should take the children into care. With all the experience of my very new career in child welfare and

the brashness that comes to a 25 year old neophyte, I threaten all sorts of dire consequences if they did not send someone on the first plane to Miami to pick up the children. They did, and the children were returned to New York.

My next experience was to come about a year and a half later, when teenagers Hungarian freedom fighters were resettled under similar circumstances around the U.S.A. The lesson was very clear. These were child welfare cases and needed that expertise and professional service that the field had. The problem was that no one in the refugee resettlement field, in either the voluntary or public sectors even knew that this expertise existed. In 1980, during the Mariel exodus from Cuba, we learned that in certain sectors, not much had changed. Many of the errors of 1957 were repeated and what had been learned in the intervening years was ignored. The result was an unmitigated disaster for the some 900 unaccompanied minors in that exodus.

From the beginning of time, unaccompanied children refugees have been part of the unplanned and unstructured movements of peoples fleeing war, hunger, natural disasters and persecution. With the elderly, they are among the most vulnerable. If they survive, many carry the scars for the rest of their lives. But many do survive many sufferings, despite even the misdirected and misguided efforts of people of goodwill to help them. Many are exploited. But what continues to amaze me, after some thirty years of living with such children, is their resilience, their ability to adjust, to respond to love and to build new lives.

This is what led me, about three years ago, to accept an invitation to chair a taskforce of the Council on Accreditation on Services to Families and Children. Our charge was to develop accreditation provisions for agencies which serve unaccompanied refugee children. My goal was to institutionalize in the child welfare field what had been learned over the past half century, from the Jewish children fleeing Nazi Germany in the 30's to the Central American and Haitian children of the 80's. The central theme of this paper is the absolute need of trained social workers, who understand the children's cultural and language background to intervene in the process as early as possible. The COA provisions, now implemented, reflect these goals and have been very well accepted in the child welfare field. However, we need to make them better known in the wider field of refugee services and to have them accepted and followed by the public and voluntary refugee agencies.

The Italian and Hungarian experiences, brief as they were, prepared me for what was to come in the Fall of 1960, the Cuban Refugee Crisis, which was to make Miami the refugee capital of the Americas.

October 1960, Miami was reeling from double blows of a severe economic recession which marked the end of a 15 year old post war boom and an unprecedented, unplanned and uncoordinated influx of refugees from our neighbor only 90 miles south, Cuba. By October, there were well over 150,000 penniless refugees in Miami. Led by Coleman F. Carroll, first bishop of the two years old diocese of Miami, the community

had appealed to Washington for relief. Our argument was that this was a national problem which had arisen out of the foreign policy of the U.S. If U.S. Immigration choose to let the Cuban people in, then the newcomers were a national responsibility, not one that Miami had to face alone. President Eisenhower send his former coordinator of the 1967 Hungarian Refugee Program to Miami to evaluate the situation. This set the stage for my next encounter with unaccompanied refugee children.

Pedro Menendez was a 15 year old Cuban boy alone in Miami when a man brought him to my office and asked if the Church could care for him. He had been sent to relatives a month earlier who were unable to take him in because they were in desperate straits themselves. He had been passed from one household to another. In the course of the month in Miami, he had lost ten pounds in weight. Pedro, who was to give his name to the Program, was the first of 14,000 unaccompanied Cuban children between the ages of 6 and 18 who would come to us during the next 24 months. Some 50,000 children were on our lists, waiting to come when commercial flights from Cuba to Miami ceased during the October missile crisis of twenty-five years ago.

Almost all of these children were sent from Cuba through a clandestine operation code-named Pedro Pan. I was responsible for the Miami end and the Cuban end was coordinated by Ramon Grau Alsina and his siter Polita. Their uncle, Ramon Grau San Martin was a former president of Cuba. In 1964, they were both arrested and sent to prison for their efforts

on behalf of the Cuban children. Polita was released in 1978 and Ramon just one year ago. They now live in Miami and for the first time, I am learning many of the details of what went on in Cuba during those two years.

Between December 1960 and October 1962, when commercial flights from Cuba were suspended because of the Cuban Missile crisis, some 14,000 unaccompanied children came to Miami.

Because of our early intervention, we were able to turn what was an unplanned and uncoordinated movement into a planned program which guaranteed the protection of the children. From the moment of stepping on the plane in Havana, until their discharge to their relatives, parents or themselves, when they reached their 19th birthdate, they were guaranteed shelter and protection. The morning after their arrival in Miami, they were interviewed by an experienced child welfare worker in Spanish and planning for their future began. Their initial placement in Miami was in a shelter, which had an entirely Cuban environment and thus the trauma of separation was eased.

The task of coping with such numbers was eased by the fact that some 50% of the new arrivals were destined by their parents for the homes of relatives or friends in Miami. Many of these later came back into care in an orderly fashion as the expected quick return to Cuba or early arrival of their parents lengthened into months and eventually years.

Despite many such reunions, when Operation Pedro Pan ceased in October 1962, we had some 4,500 children in care in 31

states, under the supervision of 101 Catholic Charities agencies. Of those taken under care, 70% were teenage boys, 20% teenage girls and 10% were children under 12.

I opened the first group home for teenage boys and moved in myself as the father figure on December 26, 1960 and I closed that group home on June 30, 1981. However, long before that, our numbers had declined. The Freedom Flights from Cuba began on December 1, 1962 for the purposes of family reunion. Six months later we had only about 500 children under care and from then on, number steadily decreased. All but a handful of the children were to see their parents come from Cuba, though some waited many years.

During the last ten years of the program, we received few children from Cuba directly, but more typically they were child welfare cases, who happened to be Cuban. By 1981, the new cases were typically Miamian, usually english-speaking and our regular child welfare programs were capable of dealing with them. The need for a special program was no longer there.

Since that time, however, we have been able to work out various intervention strategies as unaccompanied minors from Haiti and Central America are intercepted by the United States Immigration. To avoid having to confine them in INS detention centers, the Community Relations Service of the Department of Justice intervenes and places the children in our regular child welfare programs. The significant thing is that CRS has trained child welfare workers on the staff.

Their activities on behalf of children are not well received by the INS.

This, very briefly, is our story of the last thirty years. The human story is much longer. It goes on every day. A few weeks ago, a group of 40 Cuban women from as far away as Milan, Italy held a reunion in Miami. They had been placed by us in Villa Maria, a Catholic Charities facility in San Antonio, Texas. They relived the joys and tears of those faraway days. A few days ago, a man came into our office to repair a computer. He asked one of our staff to run a program to test his work. In it he saw a reference which made him ask did we know anything about children who came from Cuba alone twenty five years ago. He cried when he was told yes. For years he had been trying to find out how he was sent at the age of six to a foster home in New Mexico, where he lived for four years until his parents came. We were able to share his file with him. A TV documentary was made a couple of years ago about one young man who was sent from Santiago de Cuba when he was ten years old. His steps back to his old home and his search for relatives and his old nursemaid were recorded by a television crew and made into a film for television. And so the story goes on.

But I did not come all the way here today, just to tell you stories. I believe that there is much to be learned from our experience. As I said, I wanted to somehow or other get it into the mainstream of consciousness in the child welfare and refugee fields. There will, unfortunately be more such exodus.

The history of the last fifty years records a litany of such movements: Jewish and Basque children in England and France and Catalonian children in Mexico during the late 30's, British children in the U.S. in the 40's, Hungarian children in the 50's, Cuban children in the 60's, Indochinese children in the 70's and Haitian and Central American children in the 80's. I reads like a nationality of the decade list. Unfortunately, we have no reason to think that there will not be more.

This is why I want to spend a few minutes discussing some of the latest Provisions for Accreditation developed by the Council on Accreditation.

The section is entitled: **Foster or Group Care for Unaccompanied Minor Entrants or Refugees.**

The first principle laid down is that the agency complies with all the required provisions for foster or group care of dependent children. However, such agencies must meet these additional provisions if they wish "to meet the need of children from other countries for a substitute living arrangement in the absence of family members and to address their need to achieve a balance between original ethnic identity and adaptation to a new sociocultural community."

Let me just read through these provisions to give you a quick understanding of the special needs of these children which should be understood by any agency offering help, whether accredited by COA or not.

GG.1.01

The agency actively seeks to establish the legal status and guardianship of each unaccompanied minor accepted for the service.

GG.1.02

The service includes casework services for children experiencing separation from and/or loss of their biological families and long-term uncertainty about the possibilities of reunification or who need assistance in their adjustment at home or in their community.

GG.1.03

The agency coordinates those legal and social services to both the child and his/her relatives which may be necessary to achieve family reunification, including assistance to the child in learning the whereabouts of family members, arranging sponsorship for relatives willing and able to join the child in his/her country of settlement, and arranging for the child to join relatives in any other country of resettlement, if that is the family's decision.

GG.1.04

The agency provides:

- . opportunities for children to follow ethnic, cultural and religious practices in keeping with their native traditions; and
- . opportunities for children to experience social, cul-

tural and recreational activities characteristics of the community in which they have resettled.

GG.1.05

When immediate reunification with the child's parents is not possible, the agency regards the child's interests as primary and, in its plans for permanence, considers; in order:

- . a home within their extended family;
- . adoption only when there is clear evidence of the death of family members or relinquishment of parental rights;
- . foster family care when the child can benefit from and accept family life;
- . group home or other forms of congregate care when the child may benefit from group living and can make constructive use of a group living situation; and
- . an agency supervised independent living arrangement for children over the age of 16 and those who have had prolonged experience of providing for their own survival.

GG.1.06

Each child served has a continuing relationship with a bilingual worker, unless the child's command of English makes this unnecessary.

GG.1.07

The agency provides services which assist children and youth with life planning and with the identification, establishment, and maintenance of relationships with significant adults.

FOSTER PARENTS

GG.2

FOSTER PARENTS AND GROUP CARE PROVIDERS ARE RECRUITED AND TRAINED TO MEET THE SPECIAL NEEDS OF UNACCOMPANIED MINORS.

GG.2.01

Foster parents with whom children in this service are placed are of the same ethnic background as the children whenever possible and are qualified by a reason of:

- . their bilingual ability and/or their bicultural sensitivity; and
- . their personal characteristics, temperament and experience which qualify them to care for children placed in their home and provide them with care, protection and the nurturance of their normal development.

GG.2.02

Training is provided to the foster parents and other providers of group care for unaccompanied minors:

- . to orient them to the agency's policies;
- . to familiarize them with accepted practices for, and problems expected in, foster and group care of children experiencing resettlement in addition to separation from family members; and
- . to strengthen their capacities to meet the children's needs, particularly with respect to the differences

they may encounter in rearing children who may have ethnic identity varying from that of the foster parents, including orientation to the cultural aspects of the child's background.

GG.2.03

Payment to foster parents is commensurate with the cost of maintaining the child, the standard of living in the community, and the additional special expenses incurred by the children in this service for maintaining familiar, ethnic and cultural ties.

Everytime that there is news story about refugee children, people respond who would never think of responding to a similar appeal for dependent children in the local community. Most are anxious to help out of genuine concern. Some however are totally naive regarding the difficulties of caring for children from different cultures and traditions, to say nothing of language. We have seen real cases of exploitation, when the child does not have the protection of a licensed child-placing agency. We have the experience of even trained staff, as well as foster parents who thought that the most important task was to make Americans out of them as soon as possible, discouraging the child from contacts with his or her own ethnic groups, from speaking their own language. This later was very evident in New Mexico, where many of our Cuban children were placed with Anglo families who looked down on their Mexican neighbors. Almost all our Cuban children forgot how to speak Spanish. When reunited with parents, they refused to speak Spanish

again. Needless to say this made their second adjustment very difficult.

The possibility of family reunification must always be kept open and it should be accomplished as soon as possible after the arrival of a parent in this country. Our experience was that unless the child was party to the family's adjustment to their new life, adjustment to living with their family was very difficult. We always encouraged the resettlement of the family in the community where the child had been placed and where he or she had established certain roots. In the case of teenagers particularly, this meant that they could be of great help and enabled them to achieve a certain status, which was very important if the separation had extended over several years. Many parents had difficulty in realizing that their children were now teenagers, or even adults. The agency must be sensitive to all these nuances if problems are to be avoided.

By way of conclusion, I would like to mention one very important factor which distinguishes these children from those who are usually seen in child welfare agencies. THE VAST MAJORITY OF THESE CHILDREN COME FROM STABLE FAMILIES WHO LOVED THEM AND CARED FOR THEM. This means that they have a very positive self image, great strength of character and can adapt very well once their security is assured. This explains the very successful lives and adjustments that our children made in the United States. It is the task of the agency not to destroy this by well-meaning, but misguided efforts. We have our share of horror stories that would take too long to

tell. What we did learn was that separation from family, while always painful, is not necessarily traumatic when it does not involve rejection and abuse which are so often the experience of our dependent children and runaways. These children are different in more ways than one. Yes, we had our share of disturbed children, but each had long history, long before they left Cuba. Less than one hundred out of 7,000 in care required psychiatric care during those first five years. Later, as we got referrals from the community between 1966 and 1981, it was a different story. Almost everyone required some intervention. The lesson is obvious. Early intervention and the assurance that they are still loved and will be cared for makes all the difference.

Each year, many of those who lived with me get together for my birthday. Each year, their stories get better. Today they have teenagers of their own. At these reunions, their wives and children see a very different side of their fathers as they realize that they were once teenagers like themselves, but under very different circumstances. For me, it makes it all worthwhile.