

Christmas Dreams Come True For Two Cuban Refugee Families

Brockport — Two Cuban families have been dreaming of a red, white and blue Christmas and, this year, their wish has come true.

Orlando and Xiomara Perez and Raul and Virge Perez are spending their first Christmas in America. In fact, it's their first Christmas ever.

Alfonso Fernandez of the Cuban Lyceum of Rochester says, "This is a freedom Christmas for them." He explains, "There's been no Christmas with Castro. The Communist system didn't want it."

Fernandez is one of the "old Cubans" who has been in this country for over a decade. He remembers the old Cuban Christmas traditions: a Christmas Eve feast with pork, rice, black beans, and tortoni, an almond-covered nougat. The holiday celebration was held on Christmas Eve instead of Christmas Day and children received small gifts on Jan. 6 instead of Dec. 25. Fernandez says the "old Cubans" have kept the traditions alive in America.

For the Perez families, these are new traditions. The couples will be spending their first Christmas with Cuban and Puerto Rican friends in Rochester.

Fernandez reiterates, "This is their freedom Christmas. Next year they have a Christmas tree and decorations."

The flight to freedom was a long and difficult one for both Perez families. The families are not related to each other, but, coincidentally, both settled in Brockport. The families live in the same apartment building and both couples work as cleaners at the SUNY College at Brockport, positions quite different from the ones they held in Cuba. Raul was a certified public accountant in the National Bank in Cuba, and his wife worked in a coffee shop. Xiomara was an elementary school teacher and Orlando worked in a factory as an upholsterer.

Their journeys to this country were similar; the plight, the same. Raul Perez, who is beginning to master the English language, calls the journey "fantastic." He explained his escape through interpreter, Dr. Francisco Zayas, director of the bilingual multicultural education program at the SUNY College at Brockport.

"When the government found out Raul wanted to



The Raul Perez family: Olenka, Virge, Raul and Erduinn.

leave. Virge and Raul were fired from their jobs, expelled from their homes, and chased. Their friends and relatives were harassed by police and the Perez's had no place to go. They lived in the streets, slept under the trees, and were arrested by the police and taken to jail."

Raul explained that the police tried to separate him from his wife and children, and beat him. He points out a scar over his left eye.

Zayas translates, "It was police brutality. Raul knew that if they would be adamant in their decision to stay, they would get back their home and jobs. There was psychological pressure to change their minds."

But Raul and Virge had already made up their minds to "escape the governmental tyranny in Cuba" and start a new life in America. Raul destroyed all documents showing he was a professional and confessed to a list of lies to get a new personal identification card and papers. He claimed he was a drug addict in order to be labeled as an "undesirable," thus permitting him to leave the country.

The journey was long and treacherous. 54 people crowded into a boat designed to hold six people. The boat began to sink. Raul, Virge, their daughter Olenka, their son Erduinn, and 50 other "boat people" were rescued off the shore of Cuba by the U.S. Coast Guard and brought to Key West, Fla.

Orlando Perez and his family left Cuba under similar circumstances for similar reasons. Xiomara says, "I want my children raised in a free country where they don't have to worry about the government."

Orlando had been helping friends who'd been physically beaten and abused in the Peruvian embassy. Police immediately labeled him as an "undesirable." The family traveled to Mariel, a small town 40 miles west of Havana, for their "escape." Despite the captain's objections, 48 people crowded onto a boat designed for a half-dozen. The trip began in bad weather. Rough seas rocked the overloaded boat.

Zayas explains, "The boat ran into trouble and a U.S. shrimp boat saved them." Orlando's five-year-old son



The Orlando Perez family: Orlando, Orlandito and Xiomara.

Orlandito, was very sick when they arrived in Key West after the 12-hour journey. Upon arrival, the child was immediately taken to a doctor where his problem was diagnosed as nervous tension from the trip.

The Perez families' journeys from Florida to New York were sponsored by the Cuban Lyceum of Rochester and a Catholic family organization. The groups helped them find a home and jobs in the village of Brockport. The Perez families find the village "very nice, quiet, happy, peaceful, and good for the children."

Orlandito and Erduinn attend the Brockport campus school and have been learning English rapidly.

Adjustment to life in America has not been difficult. Roger Knapp, chief janitor at the College at Brockport, says, "They are willing and have done a good job." He says there were some minor communication breakdowns when the Perez couples first started working at the College. "Those were all worked out," he says. We just called in an interpreter.

"Another initial problem was the police," Knapp says. Zayas explained that because of their fear of the Cuban police, the foursome felt threatened by the appearance of public safety employees at the College. Management introduced them to the campus police to alleviate those fears.

"The difference in life style is striking to the Perez's," Zayas says. "Housing in Cuba is difficult to find. There is very little new construction and families are not given much mobility. In fact," he says, "you can be divorced in Cuba and still live in the same room with your former spouse. There's just no place to go."

Unlike their Spartan accommodations in Cuba, the families each have a large, modern apartment on Holley Street in Brockport. Zayas explains that in Cuba a dozen people would share what each Perez family has here.

Virge is proud of her refrigerator. "In Cuba, a refrigerator would cost over \$1,000," according to Dr. Zayas, "and Orlando was earning just \$95 a month." His salary in the United States is about five times that amount.

Xiomara and Virge are especially pleased by the supermarkets. Dr. Zayas says, "They didn't even know the foods they found in the market existed. In Cuba, they have a system where food is rationed. It's very limited. Cuba produces food for exportation. Since the economy situation is near bankruptcy, they sell almost everything they have."

Food this Christmas will not be a problem. The Perez families are looking forward to their Christmas Eve feast and a New Year's Eve dinner and celebration.

Seton Film

"A Time for Miracles," a documentary on the life of St. Elizabeth Seton, and produced by ABC Circle Films, will be shown from 8 to 11 p.m., Sunday, Dec. 21, over Channel 13, WOKR-TV.

Needy Deadline

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Business in Diocese

John R. Doser of Fairport has joined Wolff Associates as public relations director. Doser, a former columnist and sportswriter with the Courier-Journal, has also been associated with Rumrill-Hoyt, Upstate Business Journal and Gannett Rochester Newspapers in various editing and writing positions. He has operated his own public relations firm for the past six years.

He is a former president of the Rochester Press-Radio Club.

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