

WITNESS FOR JUSTICE

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Being Welcomed

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I came to the United States as an “unaccompanied minor” at age 13. By that I mean that my parents sent me here from Cuba by myself, to live with relatives, in order to protect me from the dangers – both real and imagined – of growing up in a communist country. Those were the days of the Cold War and the not so cold Cuban missile crisis that brought the United States to the brink of a real armed conflict with our island neighbor.

The people and the government of the United States were very welcoming and quite generous to my family and me and all the Cubans that have sought refuge in this country through all these decades of almost constant migration. The absence of flights between Cuba and the US has not stopped a constant exodus across the Straits of Florida. Many thousands of Cuban “balseros” – those valiant or desperate men and women who cast their fate to the sea in makeshift crafts, often little more than inner tubes tied together with rope – have perished in the attempt to reach the coast of the United States. Those who made it, the fortunate who set foot on US soil have been granted political asylum. The aunt I went to live with all those many years ago received \$33 a month from the US government to help her clothe and feed me. \$33 was real money back then. As a result of this, I was able to go to school, learn English, and make my way in my host country.

In the now, many decades since those early days, my family has prospered, grown, and become fully integrated into American society, while keeping the language, and some of the cultural values we brought with us. We have given back to our adopted country by attaining educations and achieving professional goals. There are three generations of my family in this nation and while we remain rooted in our Cuban culture and traditions, we are very integrated into mainstream American life.

Cuban Americans are a privileged group of immigrants. We have done very well because we were treated very well. There are five first generation Cuban American members of Congress and you find Cubans engaged in every aspect of American life. We were a successful experiment. It is this success that I think about when I hear talk of immigration reform.

I can only imagine what those other immigrants could contribute to the great American project if they were all given the opportunities my family had. One can only hope they will be given the chance.

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