

Interviewee: Elisa Chovel
Interviewer: Miguel Gonzalez-Pando
Date: March 1997
FIU Number: 522

EC=Elisa Chovel

MGP= Miguel Gonzalez-Pando

EC = No, I can't say that... [Laugh]

MGP = You ever saw Que Pasa USA? And that was the theme.

EC = No, I can't say that I would be. Can you imagine for the rest of my life I will be known in the Cuban community as being violated, violated, with the thermometer, right, right?

No.

MGP = So you actually had more than one foster ... after how long were you there in the first foster home?

EC= In their first foster home, we were about a year and she was relocating to Baltimore. She wanted to take us with her, but Miss Murphy, the social worker, wanted us to stay in Buffalo so, in church, on a Sunday service the priest at the parish mentioned that there were some Cuban refugee children unaccompanied Cuban children that needed a foster home and a little girl from an Italian family, Anita Galanti, said to her parents, mom and dad Why don't we take the Cuban girls in with us and they already had three girls. There were three. They went up to the parish priest, and they said we would like to have the Cuban children come and stay with us, and that is how we found our second foster home. In the parish that where we went.

MGP = In Buffalo

EC= In Buffalo. I think he was such a lovely and kind gesture. From a family to all of a sudden take two strangers, we were teenagers already. How many people would open up their homes today to say will take two children from another country.

MGP = How was that experience with the second foster?

EC= The second foster family was a beautiful experience... It was more enriching because the father, Mr. Galanti, loved to cook. I love to cook myself, so I learn all the Italian dishes we were going to the countryside in the weekends and pick the fresh berries and the fresh vegetables because the grandmother had a farm and I love the idea of how every child in the family divided their chores. One week one would do this and then next week the other one would do the other. Amazingly. I was learning English so rapidly I had no other choice, of course, because I was the only person in my high school that spoke Spanish. I started bringing the dictionary with me to school on class, and I realize that things were happening so quickly that I had no time to even look up the words, so it was sort of like osmosis. You know, you just try it, until I know what I was saying finally.

MGP = During these three years -three and a half years- that you were in Buffalo. (03:40-03:50, MGP explains EC details about interview process in Spanish)

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Those three and a half years in Buffalo, you **were with?** (03:58) two foster parents. Did you ever feel... well your parents had told you that you will be back in no time? And now time went by, kept up going by, did you ever feel I will never see my parents again?

EC = The day that I realized that this was very serious, and then I may never see my parents again was when the crisis of October. There was such a sense of dread

MGP = the Missile Crisis –

EC = When the October missile crisis occurred, It dawned on me that I may never see my parents again. I had such a feeling of dread. I had such a feeling of embarrassment that out of my beautiful country, my beautiful dear island, someone had emerged from there that my even cause the world to end. I was so sad; I was so embarrassed and ashamed. What a horrible mistake. I felt when I went into class and it was like wildfire. You know, the fear. I wanted to apologize to the rest of my classmates. That how could this mad person cause the world to become extinct. We were at the verse of another war, a terrible war. It was such a sense of hopelessness, and then, I also was angry. I was angry at the generation that sent us. Because, why couldn't they have been more responsible of the situation? Where were all the Cuban Macho man? That led all of this happened. I was already 16 - 17 years old and I was so angry that all of these things had happened, and that there was nothing I could do. I was sent away. I had really not much to say about it. It was something that everybody was doing. It was temporary. It was for our safety but then, there was a truth behind all of this. Everybody left, no, nobody was responsible. We were so down the river and now it was going to be this horrible and not just for us also now for everyone. How foolish, how stupid, how senseless, how horrible what a sin.

MGP = And about... your parents promised that You'll be back in no time; Did you ever question whether you would ever again see your parents?

EC = When the missile crisis happened, I thought This Is It. I will never see my parents again. I will never see my parents again. My sister, who was younger, knew for sure that she would never see my parents again, and she decided a short...

[07:45-07:59 break in recording]

MGP = Throughout these three and a half years, Do you remember, at some point, talking to your parents in the fall?

EC= Yes, through the three and a half years that we were alone, from time to time, we were able to talk to my parents. They had applied for visas, which were not coming. I contacted my aunt in Granada, Spain. She was a Mother Superior of the Sisters of Charity, Anne. Through her, they were able to get a visa to go to Spain. Once they got to Spain, they hinted and promised that they will be coming to my graduation. Because what I did -as safer- evolved, I think, was I immersed myself in studying. I wanted to study. I wanted to have good grades. I wanted to do the best that I could, and since they accepted my credits from Cuba, I finished high school in two years. I graduated with honors and

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incredibly, I had perfect scores in the New York Regents exam, so I have been awarded four-year-scholarship to college. My parents said we're not going to tell you anymore but look for us on your graduation day. Well, I wish they hadn't said that to me because I had all of these... my dream, that I was going to be graduating with my cap and gown with honors. And out of the door, like out of a dream or a movie, my parents were going to arrive and that never happened. Then the following year, I went to college and I was living on campus. Because I left the setting of their foster home, it affected my sister. I came on a weekend to visit and my foster mother told me that my sister did not want to see me. I thought the world had ended. I thought the floor had caved and I was going... the Earth was going to swallow me. My sister didn't want to see me. My Foster mother told me that my sister now wanted to be American and that she wanted them to be her parents. I thought it was... death was up on me. I never, I don't know how I lived through that moment. I don't know how I even left the house. I went back to the dorm. I thought it was the end, the end for me. I had, I was supposed to be my sisters' mother. I was supposed to take care of her for my parents and now she herself didn't want to see me. Now I realize that I had left her because I went to live on campus at the University, so she must have felt abandoned. She was already used to her American family and, for sure, she thought we were never going to see my parents again. The little vacation, the little will see you in two weeks, you'll be back in no time, had already been three and a half years. When you are twelve, and then you are fifteen and a half going on sixteen, that's a long time. That is a very long time. I think that the younger the children were, the harder was to understand.

MGP = Now we...

[12:20-13:25, break to fix mic]

MGP = So in a sense, your sister...

EC = I was angry at a whole system, at a whole generation that did not stand up for their rights.

MGP= Do you try to put this on a generation, but did you personally say that on your parents?

EC= No, I didn't and I didn't because I have always had a universal feeling about everything, even when I was a little girl Guanabacoa standing outside in the corner of my father's shop. I always felt I was a child of the universe. I was concerned with everything that was going on and it always made me very angry. Because in school I was learning with a wonderful teacher at Santa Teresa about democracy, and about human rights and about how to fight. And then I was going to my father's business and I heard people giving their voting rights to somebody else to work for their favorite candidate and all of these things were made were making me angry. So I had very high standards of what I felt the country should be going. I was very disappointed and then I felt, what fools we were. How foolish are parents were to fall in that trap that they were going to send us, and it was only going to be temporary and that everything was going to be okay because the Americans and the Marines, I remember, the Marines will be landing any moments

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because it's happened in the past and they're going to be right around the corner and they're going to settle the problem for us. No, the problem was ours. I was very angry when I was in Buffalo. I know we had lost it and it was going to be many years.

MGP= When did you actually got to see your parents again?

EC = Well I had finished my first year at the University. My parents were in Spain. They got finally the visa to come to the United States. It was very, it was very exciting. I try to buy them, buy them clothes and whatever I thought that might need for them to come. But the most unbelievable and hard thing was that my sister didn't want to come with me to the airport to greet them. I had to go alone to see my parents. I remember them coming towards me. I had forgotten what Spanish accent my mother has. She has this this accent from the Canary Islands and she speaks very very fast and they came towards me, and they are walking towards me and I can barely believe that is true that I'm seeing them again. I had forgotten their speech even on the first thing is... donde esta tu hermanita? "where is your little sister?" I had to say that she was sick that she had the flu. I couldn't tell him how could I tell my parents my sister didn't want to see them. It was, I think, it was probably the most difficult moment of my life. Because it was a moment of truth. How could I break their hearts and tell them that my sister doesn't want to see them? So the social worker knew and he arranged that the first night we were going to be in a hotel so that I could be with my parents and see how it's going to break them the news. So you can imagine you know how am I going to explain to my parents all of these traumatic experience, and make them understand why my sister didn't want to see them just yet. So I said another one of those white lies just just sick. She has the flu. Will see her tomorrow. I don't know, I don't know how I got my wits. I don't know exactly what I said to them, but the feeling in my heart was that there was a big hole and how could I pretend that it was all together, and read my parents properly, give them the welcome that they deserved. It was, it was so unbelievably difficult. Then my sister came around. You know, it took a little while, but she came around. It was a process. I imagine that even the parents must have thought that these kids are really weird. Now they're more American. They don't depend so much on us. They had changed, but so had we.

MGP= Was it hard to re-establish the relationship with your parents? Tell me about your father, because if since I am going to interview him You know chaperone, freedom

EC = Exactly

MGP = How did that workout with your father?

EC= I remember of one incident that now seems so funny and amusing, but in Cuba had never gone out with a boy alone. There was absolutely... not even... it's unthinkable. I was already in college and I had a wonderful boyfriend, which I later married Thomas Flannigan, and he was giving me a ride back from the University and we were sitting in the car talking. My father was in the second story of an apartment that my boyfriend I had found for my parents. And he was watching us from the window, and when I went up, I

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got this speech of how a girl would never sit with a man alone in a car because that would be... you will be looked down upon. I was... Can you imagine? Because I was sitting, I got a ride back from the University rather than taking the bus. They condemned me for that. It was a totally different world for them. It was more difficult for them to get acclimated to Buffalo, not even mentioning the weather in the snow. That was very difficult for them and we had become independent. They stayed there for the winter that to finish that year and then they decided to come down and live in Miami. Which was not already part of USA. [Laugh]

MGP= How did your... did the relationship with the parents change? You know, after that whole experience.

EC= The relationship between my parents and us changed, of course, because when we parted we were protected, little girls. And when they found us, I was worldly, I spoke English, I spoke French, I was in college, I was working. I was a receptionist at the University. My sister was independent also, we dated. Underlying all of that, I felt that because I was obedient to my mother and I have become my mother's my sister's mother, she resented me. She resented me. It took many years... that she would try to get my little sister back. Away from me.

MGP= So actually, you sister did not want to see you, then your sister did not wanna see your parents, and your sister wanted to become American, and your mother resented you because she had lost her little daughter

EC= She had lost the children, right?

MGP= Have you sat down...? Did you ever sit down and talk with your parents about all this? When was it?

EC= Recently. It was such a painful process that everyone covered it. I covered, my sister covered, my parents covered, and now that I know so many others, everybody covered it because we had to survive.

MGP= Denial?

EC= We had to strive, it is a denial.

MGP= La palabra denial

EC= See, we denied all the feelings because life was very fast and we had to survive. We had we had to make a living; we had to study; we had to have our careers, we had to succeed. So, I forgot all about the camps. I forgot all about the pain. I continued. I was married to my sweetheart from Buffalo, Thomas Flannigan. I became a stewardess because when I came back to Miami following my parents, because I wanted to protect them and make sure that everything was gonna be alright for them. I found that I was not accepted. In Buffalo, everybody loved us, in Miami, people resented us. To me that was absolutely shocking.

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MGP= What did you say? You said everybody in your family.

EC = No, not my family. I went to work at Burdines Downtown and I was the first Cuban that worked in the Better Sportswear Department. All the ladies that worked there were elderly, really elderly, so all of a sudden comes this young Cuban girl with some college education, that speaks three languages and all of the clients go to me. They would do things like short change my... the cash register and being nasty to me and I couldn't believe it. Then I missed my American friends. I missed my boyfriend. I missed my university, so I escaped. I became the first Cuban United Airlines stewardess. I wasn't even of age yet and they had a special permit, so I had to stay in school until I was twenty.

MGP= This trauma and all of this anger, hostility, disappointment that developed between your parents, your sister and you; When did you, when did you all talk about it?

EC= All those feelings of abandonment and resentment and disappointment were under a veil of sadness and at the same time acceptance, because I didn't. I didn't think that there was anything that I really could do because my parents really couldn't understand where I was coming from. Partly because I never told them what I went through. I wanted to protect them. I did not want to give them heartache, so all the things that happened to me they never knew that I nearly died. They didn't know any mishap that ever happened to my sister or myself while we were separated. They were, they thought we had an idyllic life.

It wasn't until years later that I started telling them what had really happened. It wasn't until my children were the age that I was when I left that the shoe went in the other foot, and I realized what I would and would not do to save my kids. It took all of that time to know that if I had to part with my kids because I thought I would save them, that I would. It was a whole span of time.

MGP= So after you became a parent, at that point, you think that you really got to forgive your parents? I don't know if forgive is the word

EC= No. When my children, when my oldest daughter Bridget was my age, the age that I was when I left Cuba, and then my second daughter Bronwyn was about the age that my sister Maria del Carmen was when we left, I realized how sad and what a void my sister and I left in my home for my parents when we left. And I realized that probably they had a harder time than we did because we were in the new world of discovery. We were soaking everything in like sponges. We were learning. We were surviving, we're striving. We were loved and adored by our teachers. Our house parents loved us, our social workers adored us. They had nothing. They went home and their nest was empty. Totally empty. And they couldn't leave. We couldn't come back and they couldn't come and see us. They couldn't be with us. They were also engañosos, they thought they really believed that they were going to see us right away. They truly believe that it was a few weeks, a few months. It was shocking. No one knew it was going to be three years, four years, five

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years, thirty years. Some never saw their parents again. The myth of the ninety miles dig us is all in. The proximity.

MGP= How much of who you are, particularly who you are as a parent, as a mother, has been influenced by this traumatic experience?

EC= I think because of the experience that I had of separation, I learned that the time that I spend with my children was precious. I learned that I wasn't having these children for myself, I was having these children for the world. I made sure that my children were very self-sufficient. They were sure of themselves, and that they could survive and live anywhere that they would have to be. That I was not I was I was not indispensable. That happened because of Tom, because my I lost my husband. I knew that life is fleeting. That each child has to know that they have a mission in life independent of the parents.

MGP= What moved do you to found group the group of Pedro Pan?

EC= What made me realized that there was a need and that there was a debt to form an organization, was the bond, that beautiful common bond, that all of those children that went through that program had. Is like we all have the same computer chip. We are understanding. We know the value of family, of love. That it is not whether they put you to live in a Castle or in the worst of the foster homes. The only thing that those children needed it was love, genuine love. I realized from my own experience. Having not talked about the experience. How important it was that all of us came to terms with that and that we spoke about it and put it behind us. To move to the next step. I have seen grown man cry. I have seen people weeping because they find their name on the list of arrival; or when they see the film and they see their little children. Because, it's so beautiful because then you realize that it didn't happen just to you. It happened to all these fourteen thousand children. So you were part of something great. Something sad, something great. And then at the same time, I feel this incredible pride because I see what these children have done, what they have overcome, and what they what they have become.

MGP= There must be a bond, special bond. Let's suppose that somebody that you have never met, you meet and you start talking and it happens to be another girl who came through Operation Pedro Pan. I imagine that there is immediately a bond there. It's like part of your family or extended family. Talk to me a little bit about that

EC= When a child that was an unaccompanied Cuban child meets another Pedro Pan, It is instantaneous. It's like being from the same alma matter. You know that the other person can understand you because you cannot explain to someone that hasn't gone through this. What it is to have parted with your family from your tight family unit. To have left your country, your language or customs, and come and be welcome in another place. You left; you have one foot over there and want food over here and that feeling of loneliness, because even if we were well treated in the best of cases, your blood was left behind. I hope that you can understand that I but... It is beautiful. It's like we're all cousins. I can't understand... you then is like you are not afraid to tell the other person anything at all in

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the world. We are Chummy with each other. We can mock each other, but on the line, all of that is the outmost respect, because you are a survivor, you survived it. You thrived and you made it, and now you're paying back.

MGP= Tell me a little bit more about the Pedro Pan Group that you found it.

EC= OK,

MGP= and what the mission of it is.

EC= I went inside of Father Walsh's office in the Archdiocese, Monsignor Walsh, after the thirtieth anniversary of Pedro Pan, and I said, Monsignor, I feel so lucky to have met so many wonderful other Cubans that are Pedro Pan. Is there anything at all that we could ever do for you to repay what you did for us? Because not only did he become responsible for greeting, also making sure that we had where to stay, he had stayed by our side for thirty odd years. He was there to welcome us. He has married many Pedro Pans. He has baptized their children. He's even burying some of us already. He never turned... He could have turned his back, that this was a program I did and that was it. No, he became really our father. I think he lost his hair because of us [laugh]. It's like he gets called from other Pedro Pans from all over the world, all the time. There is not a day that he doesn't get a call from someone. Someone needs something. Someone is saying someone died. Could you come and do a mass? Could you... anything at all. All of us feel that we can go to Monsignor Walsh, anytime, at any time of the day or night and talked to him and it is a wonderful thing, is a wonderful thing. I felt that there was something that had to be done to as a memento, as a monument to this incredible feat done by him and this incredible exodus of so many thousands of children that we couldn't just let it happen without something solid to remember it by. That we're not just all going to pick up and leave and not thank this country in a very solid way. Not that we haven't done so because individually everybody has; It is noted for having done something good in the community. I mean, we pride ourselves in doing the best that each one of us could individually in every organization that we belong to, but this is something together, this is something to remember what happened to us and under historic importance is incredible. It should stay there for other generations, for other children that need it, like we did, because father Walsh's dream was to build the Children's Village. When he said that his dream had been always to build the Children's Village, I heard bells; because when I was in Buffalo I was studying child psychology and my dream was that one day I was going to have "una casa de beneficencia" like in Cuba. That I was going to have this home where the children that didn't have parents, or were orphans, or were displaced like we were, were going to find everything they needed. The love that they needed. I visualize that I could see I could see the children where they were wearing where they were playing. They were jumping rope. I knew it was going to happen. So, thirty years later, imagine I meet with this Father Wash, which I always felt that I was a child of Father Walsh, and I ask him what it is that we can do for him and he tells me what I had dreamed about. So coincidences don't happen. It's like a hierarchy that God wanted us [Telephone Rings]. To meet and it happen at that moment [Telephone Rings],

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so I knew then that we hadn't met by chance. It was meant. Our meeting was divine providence. And that is when he said that I said well it will be done. It will be done. We decided, a couple of months after that, to organize... [Telephone Rings 40:59]... there all ringing at once!

[Break, discussion in Spanish about next questions 41:07-41:32].

EC= I think the most dramatic and saddest thing that happened to me when I came to this country was the death of my husband, Captain Thomas Flannigan, the third. He was my sweetheart that I met in Buffalo. He was the happiest Irish young man that you could meet. He was an expert at everything, sportsman. He loved to speak Spanish. He loved life. He loved his country. I learned to love this country because of Tom. After we were married, I would travel through the country because he was going to flight school. Then I had Bridget and Tom left for Vietnam when Bridget was about six months old. When Bridget was one year old and a week, Tom was killed in Vietnam. My mother called me on the phone to tell me that there was an officer looking for me and that he was on his way to my apartment. I was living in Coral Gables. My hair stood in its ends. He knocked on the door, and he asked for my name and I said yes, that's me. He said I am very sorry to tell you that your husband was killed in Vietnam. I looked at him and I said No, No. He was not killed, there's been an accident. He said no, he was... he was killed. I think I threw an ashtray at him and I said no, this cannot be so I run into the bedroom, I picked up Bridget, I run out into the street. I don't know who I was looking for. I don't know who I was looking for. A week before this, I got in a letter from Tom. And in the letter Tom was saying, how ironic that I am so far away from home, fighting Communism. The people don't want us to be here. If I lose my life, it would be a tragedy. Why at least couldn't I have been sent to Cuba so that if I lost my life, at least I gave you something back. To me, when I got the news that he was killed, his words were ringing in my ears because I had lost him. It was a tragedy and it was totally senseless, totally senseless [Crying]. If he would have been killed fighting to give me back my country, at least it would have been maybe worth it. What here he had sacrificed his life, and it was, it was worthless. He was right. He was right and he knew it. He knew it, and I knew it. To me that that was that was just pathetic. I was twenty-two years old and I was a widow. And that... I haven't stopped crying actually for thirty six years; or however it is since the Vietnam War. I remember him and I honor him and, I think, what I do is I do for him [Crying]. I do for him, because he had a heart, he had a love for life. He loved his daughter so much. He was fighting for freedom. He was fighting for his country, even though he knew that he was in the right place to be. Life is so ironic. Life is so ironic. I think that's why you have to live it to the full, to the fullest, every moment that you have. You don't know when you're going to go. That's why I think also I raised my children for the world because I know that they're not mine. I know I don't know how long I'm gonna be here. Nobody knows, nobody knows. But I think that is so shame that governments make such mistakes. And that the people are the ones that suffer. Because of all this so called political brains than make the policies, they make the policies in the name of the people and the people are the ones that suffer.

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[Break, 47:12-47:34, conversation in Spanish]

MGP= Have you ever gone to therapy to work out some of this traumatic experience?

EC= I went to a psychologist to talk about the death of Tom. Mainly because... I didn't do it until many, many years after, because what I wanted was to, I wanted to go on with my life. Because Tom's mother was Irish and after Tom's death, she said to me Elly don't be sad and don't cry for Tom. He would be so upset if he sees that you're sad and you're crying. You now have to live for him. I said she's right. I now have to live for Tom and I am not going to make a martyr out of my daughter, and I'm going to be... I'm going to be as happy as I can be and I'm going to, you know, live a full life. Many, many, many years after this, my sister suggested that I go to a psychiatrist to talk about what had happened in our lives because she had gone on and he had helped her. So I went. I think psychiatrist felt so bad [Laugh], but I think it helped me and I always feel that I am thankful for everything that has happened to me because it has made me a better person. I am more understanding, my heart is full open for everyone, and I love every little thing, from the moon to the stars, to the flowers, to the smallest things in life, to someone smiling gesture. Everything, I find meaning in everything, is not a big thing that means so much, is the everyday little things that means so much, so I don't feel that I have been chastised. I think it has been an opportunity for growth.

I wouldn't change anything actually. I had loved. I love my "golpes" and my experiences have been some sad, but very enriching and I'm ready for the next step. I'm still waiting for my, what is it, my knight in shining armor. [Laugh]

[break, 50:18-50:33, conversation in Spanish]

[End Interview]

Transcribed by: Ximena Valdivia, July 6, 2020