

Interviewee: Fernando Figueredo
Interviewer: Miguel Gonzalez-Pando
Date: July 1997
FIU Number: 527

Fernando Figueredo = FF
Manuel Gonzalez Pando= MGP

MGP= How long were you at the orphanage?

FF= Ok, yeah, we were together, I guess, for about a year and nine months at the orphanage. So we were there for a pretty long period of time. Two school years is what we ended up being in the orphanage. And you know, got to be a very humbling experience. I think the years that, that year and nine months that I spent in the orphanage taught me a lot about appreciating other cultures, other people. Also taught me, eventually, I mean after I got out, I realized that if I could live through that experience. I could live through almost anything. Those were pretty difficult years and if I could live through that, I could live through anything.

As an anecdote, my brother and I after we left the orphanage. Even though we experienced that together and he was in a different dormitory that I was. But it was a joint experience, and with my cousins. My brother, nor my cousins, nor myself, ever talked about this experience for about twenty years. We actually never even mentioned it, not a mention for twenty years. The closest we would come is when somebody would ask us where were you? We were in the orphanage. We never touched on any other details of being in that experience during the twenty years of follow. About twenty years later, I guess, there was a need, then several members of the Pedro Pan Group started talking and started getting together and we've talked a little bit about it. But to this day, my brother and I have spoken very little about that experience. It's amazing. Because it was very difficult, there's very emotional and it brings out a lot of emotions.

MGP= While you were at the orphanage, did you think you may not see your parents again? Were you able to talk to them on the phone, letters?

FF= Yes, when we were at the orphanage. For, at least for the first year, it was going through the whole experience, we really didn't think for a moment, there at the beginning, we had this feeling that we really would never see our parents again. Here we are in this orphanage, we have no control being there, with really really don't want to be there. There's nobody you can talk to because I mean there's only sisters and nuns. There are no other family members other than my brother. My cousin came in later, one of my, one of our cousins came in later to the orphanage, but there's nobody there you can talk to. And I remember my brother would write our parents some very, very tough letters. Saying this is hell, how can you get us? How could you put us into this place? How could you do this to us? And later talking to our parents, every time they received one of these letters, they got very depressed. My mother, well, my mother went into depression right after we left and she was depressed right through until the time we left. So not only was it difficult on us, it was extremely difficult on our parents. During that entire period. I guess right up until the end, we didn't think that we will ever be leaving the orphanage. And the longer the time went, the more difficult it got. The more we started to sink in that we were going

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to be in this for a long time. We spent one Christmas in the orphanage and that was a very, very difficult moment because even though this was an orphanage, most of those other kids, had someone some family member did the non-Cuban kids. That someone who remember them enough to come get them at Christmas time. They would go back later to the orphanage, but someone became to get the kids. Most of the Cuban boys ended up Christmas going to a... for two nights, I remember going to a foster family. And you know, I had no interest in really being with his foster family for Christmas, but I had to go. And so even though this family tried to be good to us and I remember there were a lot of other kids around us, basically it was just my brother and I together. And so being spending Christmas like that was very difficult, very tough. And I guess it took. Once we began at the beginning of the second year after we have been there a whole year, when our parents finally were able to get out of Cuba and we started getting some communications that they had left Cuba, some letters. It was very difficult to get letters from them. Apparently those letters were being stopped somewhere in Cuba, they weren't getting out. After they got out and we got word that they have made it out, is when we started to get some hope that we will get together again. And a few months before we finally left the orphanage, we did get a visit from my father. My father was able to come visit us at the orphanage. He couldn't take us out at the time because he had no money. He had just left Cuba and had enough money just to come up and pay the trip. Make the trip to see us. [Crying] (In Spanish, estoy tratando aqui de poder...). Seeing my father after thinking that we would never be together was very emotional, as you can imagine. Very emotional as you can see. Every time we talk about this. Every time I think and talk about this I do get very emotional. He came and stayed in the orphanage for a week. Then he had to go back... That was a tough moment. It was a happy moment when we saw him, It was tough when he left. [Emotional]

MGP= Then you must have thought, then really we are here to stay

FF= Yeah, the reaction when he had to leave... when he left, I remember, thinking, well at least they are here in the United States and at least there is hope that we will get together. Of course, what he had told us, the plan was that we will end up school year in the orphanage and then in the summer at some point, we will go back to Miami and then we all together, but that was the only thing he could do at the time. there is no way that he could bring us down, he did not have the money to fly us down and even if he had the money giving to him by the Church, by the Archdioceses, the Catholic Church, which was pretty much taken care of us, how could he take care of us, feed us when at my house, not only was my mother there, but I had two, three sisters. Two that had come from Cuba and one that was born shortly after my mother had arrived to the United States. So my father had to take care of those three sisters, my mother and he himself. So, the best thing was for us to stay there. And we did.

MGP= At any point...

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FF= [In Spanish] Pero fijate como sale la emoción, sabes, es difícil porque uno tiene todos estos pensamientos ahí clavados atrás y trata de no sacarlos. Yo los he sacado varias veces, y cada vez que lo saco... very emotional.

MGP= [Laughlin] tu me preveniste.

FF= Vamos a ver. Oye, lo que ahora lo que va a ser un bochorno que salga eso, pero Bueno.

MGP= Tú no eres el único que ha llorado en esto.

FF= Si?

MGP= At any time during the almost three years you were at the orphanage, did you feel anger toward your parents?

FF= Yea, many time we felt anger towards our parents and in particular my older brother, Hector, felt very angry. I remember he and I would talk and he felt that we had been almost abandoned. He felt that we had been abandoned by our parents. I didn't feel quite the same way, but I also felt that for some reason, that I could not understand, this had happened. For some reason. How could anything be so bad that they could send us to the United States like this and let us be in an orphanage. Even though we were send them letters saying this place was like hell; how could they not respond to us, why would they not taking care of us, how could they leave us there. That's why we became very angry. Again, my brother much more than I was. Of course, at the time you do not understand why.

MGP= You have three daughters now, Fernando. The question is, in a similar circumstance, what would you do?

FF= I have thought about that many times. I have three daughters and I have thought about how could I ever leave them. I am sure my parents felt the same love for my and my brother that I do for my children. I am thinking that they must have been desperate. They must have been... whatever they were seeing in Cuba, whatever they were facing, they must have felt desperate. Because being able to let go your children like that, it had to be very difficult. Later I found that, after we got together, my mother had been very upset through the whole almost two years. I can't imagine. I cannot imagine anything that would lead me to break away from my children like that. When you stop and think about what they did, I am happy that they did it. I am very, very happy, I am glad that they were able to get us out and now I thank them, I have thanked them nay times for that.

MGP= When you reflect on your life, you have a good share of accomplishments in life. This experience, do you think that helped you, make you stronger [14:18], decisive, how does this...

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FF= This experience has definitely made me appreciate life a lot more and appreciate other people. I appreciate friends. I make friends very easily. One of the things I have learned is that other people that have a lot less than I do can be respected just as much as I can respect the CEO and President of a company. I get along with the cleaning people here all the time, I mean very well. I get along with the cleaning people here very well. On Christmas time, I bring them gifts and they bring me gifts. I have, since I left the orphanage and I became an adult, and even when I was going through high school, I started helping unprivileged kids, underprivileged kids, children of very low-income families. As an adult in the companies that I have worked with, I have been able to set up community programs to help orphans. Every year I would try to do something through different programs to go and help the orphanages here in Miami and different disadvantaged kids' children groups. So, if anything, I think it had taught me to be much appreciative of life. I think it has also made me very strong in realizing that no matter what happens, I can survive anything. People know me as being very flexible and being able to stand a lot of stress and a lot of pressure. I don't know if it is because of that, but no matter what happens, I'll be able to survive whatever the circumstances. I have been able to take on some personal crisis and some professional crisis because of that, I believe.

MGP= Have you ever taken your family back to Saint George,

FF= St. John's? I took my wife back to St. John's a couple of years ago. We walked through. The orphanage is still there. It is now, unfortunately, an insane asylum. So they had turned the orphanage into an insane asylum, so if it was depressed and if it brought back bad memories from back then, imagine what it was like walking in there now and seeing some people that were very deranged and mentally unstable walking through the place. I gotta tell you that we were there a short time and my wife wanted to get off because she got depressed just by looking at the place. Even though I was depressed, I wanted to walk through. I mean I walked through some of the old hallways and I walk in to the dining area and it was still the same. I walked up and around the stairways and I could identify very clearly and very quickly, put myself back in the years that I had been at the orphanage. It was a difficult moment, but it was also some soul searching, maybe some self-healing being able to go back and being able to walk through there.

MGP= Is there anything we haven't touched that you feel may be ... [inaudible, 18:12]

FF= Leaving the orphanage. I remember the day that I left the orphanage. Most of the Cuban boys left at the same time, because all of the parents basically had the same plan. Most of the parents had come over by that time. Since the school year was over and the Archdioceses had to arrange for all of us to return, it arranged for all of us to return together. I remember the day that I left the orphanage. The two boys that I had been dealing with together for a long time, Thomas, the African American boy, and Ernie, the European, Ernie Cruz, the Puerto Rican boy. They came to the doorsteps of the

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orphanage. The entrance to the orphanage was a high steps and then a very large archway door. I still remember to this day that we were leaving in a bus, they were standing there, the two of them waving goodbye and to this day, I remember, how I thought I get out. I get out of the orphanage, I was able to leave, I don't think they would ever be able to leave the orphanage. I don't think they'll be able to get out of here. And here I was able to get out and to this day I still think about them, all the time. I tried to get into the Archdiocese, the records of the Archdioceses at one time to see if I could pull some of those records, but they are so old and so antiquary that the Archives they are in nobody knows how to find them that I had to give up. At one point I was making, about five, six years ago, I was making calls to the orphanage and to the Archdioceses to see if I could get track down the records. Let's see what else... getting back to Miami and getting the whole family together. Finally getting everybody together, my mother and my sisters and my father. I remember that day at the airport was also a very emotional moment, but it was a very happy moment.

MGP= Did you have any problems when you moved back with your family?

FF= The only problems we had when we moved back together was that it ended up that we had three families living in one house. Because our older uncle, the parents of the other cousins that were in Philadelphia just happened that they were working at the same place... in el campamento de Florida City, "Florida City homes." They were there as house parents and my father was one of the administrators, he lived outside the camp. My uncles were house parents, so they were living inside of the camp. And we ended up having all of my brother, myself, my sisters, all of our cousins and some other cousins, everybody together in one house. In a three-bedroom, one bathhouse. We had like fifteen people living together, so it was tough. It was a good experience. That ended up forming a lot of who I am today and I am pretty happy with who I am today. Had to be some good experiences.

MGP= Muchas gracias

FF= Okay

[End of Interview]

Transcribed by Ximena Valdivia, August 17, 2020.