

Interviewee: Eloy Cepero
Interviewer: Manuel Gonzalez Pando
Date: July 1997
FIU Number: 527

Eloy Cepero = EC

Manuel Gonzalez Pando=MGP

MGP= [22:15] Vamos a remontarnos treinta y tantos años atras...

EC= Cuando te conocí en la Universidad de Miami, que tu te sentabas a hablarnos allí de Cuba
[Rie]

MGP= No vamos a remontarnos a la... tú eres de La Habana.

EC= Yo soy de Pinar del Río, de Bahía Honda, un pueblo del interior, estudié en La Habana desde chiquito.

MGP= Yo conozco Bahía Honda perfectamente...

EC= Bahías de Occidente

MGP= Vamos a remontarnos ya a tu casa el año [19]59, el año [19]60. Qué edad tu tenías...

EC= El [19]59 tenía quince años, he catorce años.

MGP= Vamos a acordarnos del niño aquél, de la casa donde tú vivías. Cuando tú empiezas a oír rumores, comentarios, de que era possible que te iban a mandar a los Estados Unidos. Cómo fue eso? Te acuerdas de la primera vez te... y esto no estamos como en una entrevista de televisión de que el tiempo es... aquí tú te sientas comodo...

EC= Estamos vonversando

MGP= Y te displayas hablando todo lo que tú quieras, okay?

EC= Si, vino uno de CBS Internacional que vino a entrevistarme a qui y se metió dos horas y me dijo vengo por diez minutos y se metió... te tengo que conseguir una copia del tape. El me dijo relax, vamos a hablar y el tipo two hours.

MGP= Acuerdate de la primera vez que tu oiste algo a tus padres hablar sobre la posibilidad que te iban a enviar a...

EC= Bueno mucho antes de esto...

MGP= En English

EC= Okay, pero todavia no estamos en camara

MGP= Si, si.

EC= Oh ya? I am sorry, debiste haberme dicho eso. Okay, empezamos otra vez, dale

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MGP= Let's go back. Were you living in Miami when...? [Telephone rings].

[Break in recording to disconnect telephone, 25:32-25:42]

MGP= Let's go back in time. You are fifteen or sixteen years old.

EC= I was fourteen in 1959.

MGP= The first time you heard something, your parents discussing this among themselves or with you, of the possibility of sending you to the United States.

EC= I always in my house since my father was heavily involved in politics; we always talked about the political procedures that it would take in placing in Cuba. So from day one from the triumph of the revolution we realized just after the first four months that something drastic was happening in the island. So as things became more drastically. Drastically the mood of the country was changing. Then and people coming in were talking about that maybe communism was coming to the island. **That was surprising [? 26:59]**. My father right away, which used to be mayor of the city, run for Congress and later for the Senate was an attorney. He's realized, at the beginning he said if something happens here we have to get you guys out of here. The rest of the family was not in accord, but my mother she was in accord and she says if we have to get them out of there will get them out of there.

MGP= Do you remember when they talk to you about it? How did you feel? How did they feel?

EC= The one who was more opposed was my grandfather. He was getting old in age, he was eighty and he realized if we ever left the country that we he was going to miss us a lot. So he even when we talked about used to cry it a lot. But the fact that we were planning to get out of the country and right away as soon as the Operation Pedro Pan began in Havana, Candler College is the school we were intern in Havana. The director, Carlos Perez, was very well known person in Havana with high influence, right away he coordinated so the Methodist kids were also could live the island. So right away, he started making the arrangements and began talking to the parents to let them know that there was a way to get out of Cuba. That's how at the beginning my parents were informed that if we wanted to get out that there was a way to do it.

MGP= When exactly and how old were you when you left Cuba?

EC= I was fifteen, going into sixteen. And pretty much I was in control of what's happening in Cuba, because since I was a little boy I always like history and I used to listen to all the different programs on television and TelaPrensa, and some of these other newscasts that they used produce in the Cuban Radio and they used to read Prensa Libre en el Mundo. I

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was highly, since I was a kid, I was highly motivated to politics and to history and so therefore I knew exactly what was happening there.

MGP= You remember the day they took you to the airport?

EC= Oh yes.

MGP= Tell me about that day, step by step

EC= Before they took us to the airport. Remember we come from Bahía Honda, which is a small town, well two hours from Havana. We didn't tell anybody that we were leaving. So what happened, my parents, my two brothers and myself, they took us to Havana. Stay there about two weeks before we actually left. So we stayed in some friends house. So because we didn't want to tell anybody in Cuba, because in the little town of Bahía Honda because people were becoming extremely aggressive, especially against students, kids like us that were studying in an American school in Havana and that they thought they had "los niños bitongos" like they used to call. And so we left to Havana, like I said, we went on vacation. We told them we went on vacation, but we actually moved into... my family had an apartment house in Havana, so we moved there for the last two weeks. And then from then we went to the airport. The day we went to the airport, everybody was very nervous. We had about ten or fifteen people that went to say goodbye to us. My mother as you can see, she was extremely nervous and she was crying. But she tried to maintain composure. She wanted to show us that nothing happened. In all she says, this is going to be only temporary. This is not going to be a long time. And so they made us feel that there was something temporary. The good news that we had before we left, that we had an American family waiting for us. The guy was a highly businessman here in Miami, highly powerful. So we knew that we were coming into somebody that could take care of the three kids. As you know, the guy was MacGregor Smith. He was chairman of the Board of Florida Power Light, by chairman of Eastern Line, chairman of the Federal Reserve Bank Atlanta, member the Atomic Energy Commission. One of the one hundred most powerful Americans in the United States, and he raised my two brothers and myself, until they were able to get my parents out of Cuba. Not only did they brought them out, they actually bought them a house and bought them in business so they could survive over here.

MGP= So you were lucky

EC= Probably the luckiest group of children that you can imagine. From the fact that he said to us. I'm not going to have you call me mom and dad because your mom and dad are in Cuba just called tía and tío. It was such an impact that everybody, even in the company and their friends, began to call them tía and tío, right away. They were number of the Methodist, Coral Gables Methodist Church. We used to go to Sunday school every Sunday with them. We used to go to church, but the most important, I think, is the fact

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that how they decided to take care of us. One day, Miss Smith was in church and the Pastor announced that there were three Cuban children that were coming from Cuba, three brothers and if three families wanted to take care of them. And she said, she right away got out of the service, went to the house and Mr. Smith was doing a lot of woodworking in his house and she said, Greg, there is three Cuban boys that are coming from Cuba without parents, they are Methodist and can we take them? He says you are crazy! And she says no, I want the three of them. And then he said, no, no way. And then she started crying. And he used to please her a lot. So when she started crying then he said okay we'll take all three boys. So right away, she returned back to church and after the service she announced the Pastor that they will take all three boys. I think, to me that's the most interesting... not only that, and the teachings. One time they had a very large farming in Ocala, one Sunday he said everybody get dressed, we are in the middle of Ocala National Forest, everybody get in your suit we are going to Church. We start going into this jungle, and he was cutting all with a machete. We went to a small hill and when we got to the hill there is a large stone in there and he said, sit down I am going to preach you boys today. I am going to be the Minister today, so he preached to us for thirty minutes, he read the Bible and when he finished he start crying... he was such a human [03:56], [Getting emotional]. Sorry. He said, I cry because I know how much your parents are suffering in Cuba. It was a very touchy situation, and after that we embraced. To let you know how important this guy was. When they announced that my parents were leaving Cuba, he was in Russia with an Atomic Energy Commission, they notified him. His secretary notified him that these parents were coming from Mexico. He got the Russian air force to fly him into Finland, from Finland he took a Pan American plane to New York City, in New York City he took an Eastern Airline flight and he waiting for my parents fifteen minutes before they arrived. Because he wanted to make sure that he was here when they arrived. It show you what type of person these people were.

MGP= How long was it before your parents were able to join you?

EC= Three years later.

MGP= Cambialo, because the question will not be included. So you have to say after three years or whatever... tu entiendes?

EC= We were, actually we came in 1962 and they came in 1965. They made the arrangements through the Pan American, he had a friend in Pan American, which he was able to contact the...

MGP= Perdoname, let's say that again, pero me dijiste they, who is they?

EC= The Smiths, they had a good connections in Pan American Airline and they were able to get them visa from Cuba to Mexico through the American ambassador in Mexico. He

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made all the arrangement and as soon as they arrived to Mexico, the American ambassador was waiting for my parents in there. They stayed in some friend's house and right away they had the visa arranged and they flew them into Miami. They stay here for about a month with us and after a month he was able to obtain a house in Tampa, which my parents had a lot of friends in Tampa and he was able to take them, to fly them to Tampa, buy the house and get them a job. Get them, actually, a business. A service station so he could run. My father was an attorney, never run a station, but at least he tried and after three or four months, he decided he was not really good for the position, for the business. So therefore, they got him a job in a hospital, doing different things in the hospital.

MGP= How long were you without seeing your parents?

EC= We were three years, but to tell you the truth, the fact that these people were so good to us and whenever we had a chance they made us call Cuba so be in contact with them. My mother used to write every week and they used to answer back every week because they wanted to inform them that we were in good hands. They were going to school right away, they got involved in sports, my brother got in the swimming team, I got in the track team and basketball. We were extremely, very successful to the point that only seven months after I was here with the help of Mr. Smith, he used to train me very early in the morning, six o'clock to seven, I used to run. I was selected the first Cuban American selected to the All-City track team in the County. He was so happy when my picture came out in the newspaper. He came out with about twenty-five different newspapers, because he wanted to say to all his friends the fact that he had trained me.

MGP= Did they have children of their own?

EC= He had two children, one of them was an attorney, already gone out of the house [inaudible, 39:25]. The other one a professor at Miami Dade Community College and a newspaper [inaudible, 39:30] from The Miami Herald. He used to write for the Tropic magazine. The second, MacGregor junior used to have three kids that they used to come in to the house, every Sunday the all family would get together after church. They used to come and we used to have big luncheons right next to the swimming pool. MacGregor, the kids, the wife, the son, the three of us and both of them, the Smiths. They did that until Paul went to the University of South Florida, which she paid for that. I went to the University of Miami on a scholarship in track and the little one; they sent him to the Miami Military Academy so he could get a lot of training in military behavior. After that, I remained very close to them, because I stayed in the University of Miami. I used to come very weekend over to the house and spend the weekend with them, because I used to live at the university at the sports facility, but on Saturday and Sunday I used to come and spend the whole weekend with them. So I remained with them until I actually I went into service. It is so funny, he said you got to go into service because I would feel very

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good knowing that you served in the country, I would be able to sleep better knowing that are defending the country. [Laughing]. He used to get me all the time with... but I got very close to him. He was the guy who most influenced my life, because he said you have to be humble, you have to be good to everybody, and the more powerful and the more money you have, the more humble you have to be. Because you gotta show people that you are as equal as everybody else. I have always tried to remain as simple as possible.

MGP= So when your parents went to Tampa, you didn't go with them?

EC= No, my brother did. Because my brother was studying at the University of South Florida, the big brother. He moved with them to the University of South Florida, he lived in the house and he used to go to the university there. I stayed here at the University of Miami, I lived on campus, but I would come on weekends. And the little one was intern at the Miami Military Academy.

MGP= Eloy, did your parents feel jealous? here you are, they come to the United States they go to Tampa and you stay here in Miami and pretty much dismiss...

EC= You are the first person who ask me that, I have thought of that many, many times. This is the first time I discuss that with anybody, because I guess they must have felt maybe a little jealous but they were so glad that we were in that family. These people were so loving, so long... so loving that we used to sit, each one had a separate bedroom and we used all three of us used to go in one of these beds that you can get up and down and he used to watch television and we all three of us would sit around him and watch television with him in his bedroom. One thing he said to us, finally, after never paying attention to my real kids, now at the end of my life I have a chance to get close to you guys, because he was always so busy trying to get what he got that he never had a chance to spend with the kids. As soon as he start living with us he started doing things he never did with the kids like going in camping, going swimming with us, spending some time with the kids. He used to say that probably the three happiest life in his life because he never had a chance to share with his kids the way he shared with us.

MGP= Let's go back and say again the story, some of the things. We are going to go back

EC= Okay.

MGP= Because I want to have more material on those. I need for you to talk about being Methodist, you are at Candler College... Methodist school; how you were told that you can come to this program

EC= You see my family was Catholic, was raised in the Catholic faith. But my mother, which I consider her, was always a woman which is to the vanguard, she says okay although you are raised Catholic after checking all those schools in Havana, everybody points out that Candler College is one of the best schools in Havana so I am going to take my

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chances with you guys and I am going to send you to a Methodist school. She took the chance to send my big brother, Paul, which was at the Edison High School in Havana, and then send me, both of us together. She said I want to take my chances with you guys, because I heard so much about this school, this American school. It was as good as everybody said it was. Not only the high education, the campus, the number of baseball fields and tennis courts and racket balls, and auditorium. They had from elementary school all the way to the university Candler. After Belen was the second largest private school in Cuba. They taught us music in there, civic we had one of the best professors, most of those highly intellectuals that couldn't find jobs anywhere in Cuba. They used to go to this private school; some of them later on became ambassadors for the Castro regime and some of them very highly in the Cuba government. They sent us to the school. I was eight when I came in and my brother, I think, was ten when he came to Candler College. We began listening to the teaching of the Bible and the Minister. The Protestants, they explain the Bible a lot more like history. They don't select parts of the Bible like the Catholics do. They teach the Bible like a history book, they start from the Genesis and they end up in the Apocalypses. They try to study every chapter of the Bible, so I became highly... maybe because I like history so much, was very attached to the Religion. By the time, the Cuban Revolution came around in 1959, I was pretty much thinking like a Methodist. I wasn't thinking like a Catholic anymore. But I could see people forgot that as soon as Castro took over, Fidelito Castro was one of the students at Candler College. As soon as Castro took over, we raised among the students enough money to buy him a tractor. When Castro came to pick his son out of the school, we gave him a tractor as a gift to the Revolution. From then on, Fidelito left the school and we never saw him again.

MGP= Tell me again, how was it that you ended up with the Smith family.

EC= Well, right away

MGP= I know you already told me, but I want to

EC= The Director of the school, I was probably at that time I was one of the oldest in the school, because I have come very young. I was eight when I came to Candler College, by the time I left Candler College I was... I actually my last year was in [19]61, right after the Bay of Pigs invasion. If I remember, all the schools were nationalized right after the Bay of Pigs invasion. As soon as the invasion took over the schools were nationalized. I remember because when the Bay of Pigs I was in the school, when the invasion took place. I remember the airplanes and the bombing taking place at Columbia, which the school was close to Columbia. After that, I think the invasion was in April, in May all the classes end and by then all the private schools were nationalized. That's how I remember that I was in the school. Then I find out that that last month, right between the Bay of Pigs to the end of the school year, I remember the school principal getting every one of us

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the records, the transcripts. So we had them with us in case we had to leave the island and we could show our transcripts here in the United States. I still have mine. I remember them, making them very fast. They said we have to complete all the transcripts before the year is over because in case you gonna need it. That's when Mr. Carlos Perez's secretary got in touch with the White Temple here in Miami, which is called the... I forgot the name of the organization that took us out, but I can get it to you. It was the... the Protestant Christian Coalition, I think it was. Right away, they got in contact with White Temple, which is in Miami. They discussed to start getting us, trying to get us the visa through Pan American. As you know this all operation started by Pancho and Berta Finlay. I think Pancho Finlay was the manager for KLM in Havana, which they used to fly to Kingston in Jamaica. That's how we got, right away, we got the visa. Although we didn't leave through KLM because by the time we got... the KLM was... the permit we already had the one from Pan American and so we flew Pan American, we didn't fly KLM. We were working with the Methodist church to try to go through Kingston, Jamaica, but it never realized. So as soon as we Pan American okay to... the permit to leave the island, then we left. Like I said everybody was waiting for us, we had a chauffer at the airport and they took us, my big brother and I, they took us to Opa-Locka for the debriefing and a letter was right away sent to the Smiths. Two days later it came Eloisito, was my younger brother, and Smith came to Opa-Lockat Airport to pick us up. From then on we were... they already have the house ready for us to live over there.

MGP= Is there anything that you feel that's worth talking?

EC= Yes. As you know, I like music. I just want to tell you how compassionate these people were. They wanted us to feel as close to our culture as possible. The first thing he gave me as soon as I walked into the house was a record of Xavier Cougat and the first Christmas he gave me my conga drum, which I had for almost twenty years until I sold and I got me a LP later on.

[Interruption in recording, 52:35-52:49]

MGP= Let me ask you a question. Did you feel torn between your parents and your foster parents?

EC= No. We felt... because they would made us... They will make us write to Cuba on a weekly basis. And whenever we had a chance, back then you couldn't be calling Cuba so easy, so whenever we had a chance, we would call Cuba. But we were very much in touch with my family, but we would never torn out. They always kept telling us that our real parents were in Cuba. They would just tempo... he just he would tell us he was our foster parent. As a matter fact, he used to like music also, and he taught my little bro to play the harmonica. I remember one time we had a convention of the American Bankers Association here at the Sonesta Beach Hotel, and he took my little brother, myself with the conga drum, himself with harmonica, my big brother with maracas and we played for

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all those people there. What a guy this guy was. He introduced us as my three Cuban sons. But he always made us to remember our culture, and he said, I don't have a problem for you to play your Cuban music in my house. And as I told you he bought me my conga drums so I can continue playing the conga drum, which I later on took it to the University of Miami. I don't know if you remember that we used to play at the student union with Lusategui there, the guitar, I used to play the drums and the American used to get all mad because we used to play there at the student union. And later I took it in the Navy. When I was in the Navy took it on my ship and I when we used to get really bored at high seas I used to take my conga drum to the fantail and play the conga drums space it [? 54:54] with the black crews. We used to, after everybody went to bed, we used to bang the drums until very late at night and they used their side play [? 55:01] the conga drums and it was a lot of fun.

MGP= Anything else that we haven't touch?

EC= No, the fact, like I tell you, here we are in a house with a servant, a cook, and a maid that used to clean the house. We used to belong to all the country clubs, most of all the country clubs in Miami and living with a one of the most influential family, probably in the United States. The visitors in my house was John Pennekamp, Eddie Rickenbacker, Ed Ball from the DuPont, governor Farris Bryant, Bill Baggs from the Miami News, the senator Claude, but then was representative Pepper, all the congressman used to go to my house, and we always sat in the table with them. They used to give us an allowance, which at that time was a lot of money, for us to spend on weekends and for spending on the weekend. We used to take it to school and shared with the kids in the high school that could not afford to eat. So whatever money we had, we would distribute among the kids that. We paid our meals and then whatever we had leftover we would give it to other kids. And they were very pleased, that somebody would be able to help them because he was always teaching us that we always should help everybody else.

MGP= Tell me again as if you hadn't said it before, the complete story about the time that you went to the mountain.

EC= It was, it was something. Well, in the summer we used to have a camp, a very large camp, which now he donated for the for the conservation movement. Now it's a wildlife refuge in the state of Florida. He donated the whole four thousand acres for the wildlife refuge. We used to go in the camp, at least, for a month in the summer and one Sunday morning, he says, okay boys, are we going to church.

MGP= Cuando te refieras a "he"?

EC= I'm talking about Mr. Smith.

MGP= Tienes que decirme my foster father.

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EC= Mr. Smith.

MGP= Mr. Smith, my foster parent. Start again.

EC= Okay. Every summer we used to go camp. He used to have a camp in Ocala, close to the Ocala National Forest and Mr. Smith used to take... Mr. and Mrs. Smith used to take us over there. One morning in particular he said, boys we are going to church today, so he left the cook, which used to go with us all the time, and Mrs. Smith in the house. He says we are going to church today, so get all dressed up so he had us put on this coat and tie and suit and I told my big brother, where are we going? What church is he talking about? There is not a church around here anywhere. So he said, okay we are going to church. So we start walking into the... in this big camp, and as we get farther away we got into sort of like a jungle, was very thick, and at times, he had to cut with a machete. He was walking, he was also dressed in a blue suit, I never forget, and used to cut all the, uh, the... [In Spanish] ¿cómo se llama esto?... the brushes, until we got to this hill. And as we got to the hill, he said now we here we, here we are in church. And so we look all three of us look at each other and said is this the church? he says anywhere is a church. And so he pulled out his Bible, who had in his left hand and he start reading, reading the Bible and then after he read the Bible and preach for about thirty minutes, he broke out and start crying and everybody started crying at the same time. He came up to us and he goes, he hugged all three of us at the same time. And I asked tio why are you crying? He said I am crying because of the suffering that your parents are feeling at this time, so far and so long away from you. And then he continued crying and we hugged for a while. Then he said now the service has ended. So we returned back to the camp. So it's a very, one of the touchest moments that I have with this guy. This guy was so powerful. To give an example I have. When I joined the track team here, and they had selected me to the all-city track team, they found out that I have missed one year of school in Cuba so I was ineligible to play in the basketball team. So he got in the airplane, he went to Tallahassee, he spoke in front of the of the state Senate and House of Represent[atives]. They changed the law. And I was able to play basketball the rest of the year. I missed the first eight games, but the rest of the games I was able to play. That's how powerful, he took the school principal, himself and his private pilot and flew to Tallahassee. And he come from over there and he said Bill we won, you can go ahead and play basketball now. So I mean what a wonderful experience, what a great teaching.

[End of Interview]

Completed by Ximena Valdivia, August 19, 2020.