

A Cuban comes home

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By LISANDRO PEREZ

FOURTEEN years have passed, but the memory of that summer day is still fresh in my mind. With my bride at my side and all our possessions packed tightly into our used Dodge, I got on the Turnpike and pointed the car north, north to Gainesville, to graduate school, and to the true beginning of my adult life. I looked only ahead and thought little about leaving Miami, where I had lived for a decade after arriving as a child from my home in Cuba.



Perez

I can't remember if on that drive northward I gave even a moment's thought to ever returning to Miami. I anticipated that after finishing my studies in Gainesville I would go to whatever university would give me a job. It turned out to be Louisiana State University,

and I packed the Dodge again and moved even farther from Miami.

Last month, almost exactly 14 years after that summer day in 1971, I was coming back to Miami on the Turnpike, without the Dodge but with the same bride, plus two kids, a Beagle, and a moving van.

Since returning I have met countless fellow "returnees," contemporaries of mine from Cuba who, after living as children and young adults here in Miami, left to build their careers elsewhere. In the past few years, they have drifted back.

The number of such returnees is not limited to my acquaintances, nor even to my age group. The flow of Cubans returning to Miami from throughout the United States, perhaps even from throughout the world, has been a fairly long-standing phenomenon that has probably intensified in the past few years. In 1970, approximately 41 percent of the total Cuban-origin population of the United States lived in Dade County. Ten years later, the 1980 U.S. Census found that 51 percent of

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the nation's Cubans lived here. I have little doubt that the proportion is even greater in 1985. The tendency to concentrate here runs contrary to the trend among the other major U.S. Hispanic groups. Both the Mexican-American and Puerto Rican populations appear to be dispersing away from their traditional areas of concentration.

This return migration of Cubans to Miami is occurring without the fanfare and controversy that usually accompanies a renewal of immigration from the island. Yet, the phenomenon is responsible for an increasing proportion of all the growth in the area's Cuban population, with important implications for Miami and especially for the Cuban community.

Many of the returnees originally left Miami in search of educational or occupational opportunities that previously were not available here. Miami therefore is getting back an educated and experienced labor force that represents a positive addition to the area's economy. In contrast to their compatriots who stayed in Miami,

the returnees adjusted to life in the United States largely without the insulation afforded by a large ethnic community. Consequently, they are likely to be very adept at the rules of the game in this country, to speak English well, and to have acquired a myriad of other talents, attitudes, and skills.

Why are they moving back? I have asked this question of myself and of virtually every returnee I have met in the past couple of months. The answer is usually given in specific terms: climate, family ties, and the greater opportunities now available in Miami, particularly to bilingual persons with education and employment experience. But it is not difficult to get at the underlying reason for returning: Miami is home.

Some returnees have made sacrifices, in terms of income and employment, to move here. It has taken a while for many to readjust to life in Miami. But there is a sense of belonging here that was not possible in Baton Rouge, or in St. Louis, or in Chicago. Unlike Cuba, this is one place to which U.S. Cubans can return, a place that unites them with their past, with their roots, providing a sense of continuity and order to their lives.

As I drove out of Miami 14 years ago, it did not occur to me I was leaving home. I thought I had already done that when I left Cuba.

It feels good to be home. Miami's for me.