

New Cuban exodus quieter and bigger

A new wave of Cubans, larger than the one that came during Mariel, is adapting to life in South Florida in their own way, mostly shunning the political zeal that defined earlier waves of exiles

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NEW LIFE: Barbarita Herrera, who arrived from Cuba in September, gets ready for work in her apartment.

A sense of isolation came suddenly to Tamara Saavedra as she ended a phone call from her husband and stared at the empty Hialeah video rental store where she works the late shift.

Tears welled up in her eyes, even as a loud Latin music concert played on the television set near her: a somber mood for a woman surrounded by the latest Cuban government-produced DVDs of popular TV shows on the island, Hollywood movie releases and flashing screens of electronic slots.

Saavedra, 31, is a recent arrival from Cuba, one of tens of thousands who have come to the United States since 2000. More Cubans have arrived during the last six years than during the entire Mariel boatlift in 1980, quietly reshaping the Miami area.

Like so many immigrants, Saavedra has struggled to cope with the sense of dislocation of a new land. The problems she worries about are common: having enough money to buy medicine for her sick daughter, pleasing a husband she sees only a few minutes a day and finding ways to materialize the dreams she envisioned for herself when she left Cuba behind.

Forging ahead in her immigrant life, she doesn't always see the proverbial light at the northern end of the Florida Straits.

"The American dream no longer exists," she said, as she swept the floor of the store. "But I'm never going back to Cuba to live, not while Fidel Castro is alive."

Unlike immigrants who come from other parts of the Americas, newly arrived Cubans in their 20s and 30s have to overcome an unusual handicap. Children of the Castro revolution, they were mostly raised in the "special period" of economic turmoil that roiled Cuba in the 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

They were taught and survived in a communist system so far removed from the capitalism and democracy that govern the United States that they often feel lost in the shuffle of competition and assertiveness.

At least 130,000 Cubans have come to the United States -- the vast majority to South Florida -- since 2000. Most have entered legally through the U.S. "lottery" that allows 20,000 Cubans each year, but some have made the dangerous trek by sea, too. Many now reside in Hialeah, long a working-class gateway for Cubans and other immigrants.

Their entry has been quieter, more measured, and into a Miami area far different than the one that greeted the Mariel arrivals a generation ago. In 1980, Cubans were the major Hispanic group in Miami. The city and nation reacted mostly in horror to the unchecked immigration, which included a few thousand Cubans with criminal records.

Today, Cubans remain the largest immigrant group but no longer the majority of Hispanics here. And few people have batted an eyelid at the arrival of this new subgroup in the exile diaspora.

QUIET POLITICS

The political energy that characterized the first wave of Cuban exiles seems subdued among these new arrivals. Most of those interviewed for this article know little or nothing of South Florida politics, and keep their criticism of Castro's government to a minimum.

Ariadne Quiñones, 27, arrived barely a month ago. To her, Miami is a mere "country town" compared to Shanghai in China, where she spent six months singing in Mandarin to wealthy Chinese nationals in 2003 -- thanks to the Cuban government.

"I don't like politics," she said. "In Cuba, you leave when you can, not when you want to. It's all the same to me. All systems have good and bad things. You have to be happy where you live."

For Barbarita Herrera, 39, assimilation into American life, Miami style, has been a culture shock. Even the water tastes different than the "parasite-laden" water she said flowed from Havana pipes. But unlike others, Herrera has a hatred of the government she left behind, a system she believes is bound to change.

"Sometimes I feel like just giving up and going back," she said. "But I can't go back to that system. Castro really has to fall. You don't realize how bad things are there until you get here."

One of the few politically charged new arrivals is Manuel Vásquez Portal, a dissident journalist who served time in a Cuban prison before he went into exile last June. He says the political apathy of newly arrived exiles is a product of their disillusionment with the Cuban system, which led them to immunize themselves from politics.

"The economic deterioration on the island, a direct result of bad politics, has made living on the island a nightmare," Vásquez Portal said. "No one feels love for a nightmare, so they try to forget it."

As Herrera put it, "I'm just looking for a better life."

She seems to have found it. In her apartment: two televisions with satellite connections, an air-conditioning unit and a computer with Internet access, all donated.

Herrera said she and her daughter, Rocio De La Torre, were smuggled out of Cuba on a go-fast boat on a quiet evening off the coast of Guanabo in September. She says her daughter never paid the \$10,000 smuggling fee. But the chaos on the craft -- packed with 33 people who boarded after swimming 100 yards -- was so great that the smugglers didn't notice the extra body until the drop-off point in Dry Tortugas.

Some Cubans come with visas, some as political refugees. Some sneak across the Florida Straits or the Mexican border. But they all have a rare privilege: U.S. residency practically guaranteed a year after arrival.

More Cubans gained U.S. residency last year, about 36,000, than in any year since the early 1980s. This year, the U.S. Border Patrol is on pace to detain more Cubans who sneak into the country than any year in the past decade. They usually spend a day or two detained before being paroled into freedom.

LIFE IN HIALEAH

Hialeah has a sophisticated infrastructure to ease the transition for Cubans: video stores that rent copies of Cuban government-produced TV shows, movies and cartoons, thrift stores that sell *quinceañera* and wedding gowns for \$20, restaurants and other businesses that keep their doors open to new arrivals who need work.

L & J Video on East Ninth Street -- where Saavedra works -- rents Cuban television shows and movies, such as *Punto y Coma*, *De Cubano a Cubano* and *Elpidio Valdés* to new arrivals nostalgic for a dose of communist-era programming. Nayibi Pérez, 22, who arrived four months ago, scooped up 10 videos on a recent visit.

"This is the best thing on Cuban TV," she said, holding up a video of a Cuban detective series. "You can't even watch TV in Cuba without [the political show] *Mesa Redonda* interrupting it. Everyone wants to leave there. The food is no good. You don't get paid enough. I used to talk a lot when I was there about coming here and making money just by kicking over rocks. But few people come here and actually face this reality."

Pérez's boyfriend, Elpidio Amores, 40, who came from Cuba during the 1994 rafter crisis, told her that in Miami the only thing that can bring success is hard work.

Pérez and Amores paid the \$20 and hauled away their slices of Cuban nostalgia.

"I love these shows. They remind me of all the lies," Pérez said. "In Miami, life is hard. But it's not a lie."