

# A Sentimental Journey

by Lee Ann Sandweiss

After 50 years, Gerardo Gonzalez, dean of the IU School of Education, returned to his native Cuba.

*‘As the plane approached the runway, I saw the royal palm trees—the national tree of Cuba—that dot the landscape. I remember, as a child, going on road trips through the countryside and being mesmerized by the beautiful trees that seemingly appeared everywhere. The day was bright, hot, and humid—just as I remembered. I walked into the terminal at the José Martí Airport in utter disbelief—it had been 50 years since I last touched Cuban ground.’*

—Gerardo Gonzalez



were among the last in Cuba to receive immigration visas and enter the United States as political refugees.

Now he would be going back. “The IUAA had been granted a special people-to-people license by the U.S. Department of the Treasury to offer educational trips to Cuba,” says Gonzalez. “This was made possible by the Obama administration’s broadening outreach efforts to Cuba. Licenses are now granted for purposeful travel, including religious, cultural, and educational travel. The stated purpose of our visit was to study the culture, people, and arts of Cuba.”

While IUAA-sponsored tours are always led by professional guides, Gonzalez’s presence was an unexpected bonus for the 16 IU alumni on the trip.

“The group appreciated having someone fluent in the language and familiar with the culture,” he says. “They also realized it was an emotional trip for me.”

Last May, the Indiana University Alumni Association (IUAA) made Gerardo Gonzalez, Ph.D., an offer he couldn’t refuse.

“They called and asked me if I would be interested in taking a group to Cuba. I didn’t hesitate,” he says. After half a century, Gonzalez, 61, dean of the Indiana University School of Education, was going back to the country he had left as a boy.

In 1962 young Gerardo, his parents, and his little sister Maritza, penniless and with little more than the clothes they were wearing, fled Fidel Castro’s repressive communist regime in hope of finding a better life. They

(clockwise from top right) Gonzalez family portrait, circa 1956. Group of neighborhood children in Placetas, the Gonzalezes’ hometown, circa 1953—Gerardo, 3, is second from right. Gerardo’s First Communion portrait, 1959. Gerardo’s father, Elio Angel Gonzalez (right), with a friend in front of his auto repair shop, 1963. *Courtesy photos*

Background: Havana street scene, May 2012. *Photo by Doug Kutz*

(opposite) Gonzalez’s official IU portrait. *Courtesy of Indiana University*



Gonzalez's Cuban passport, 1958.



### Leaving Cuba

In 1962, the Gonzalez family was living in Placetas, a Bloomington-size city in central Cuba, about 200 miles southeast of Havana. Gerardo was 11 and Maritza 5. Like the vast majority of Cubans, their parents—Elio Angel, an auto mechanic, and his wife Armantina, a homemaker—had embraced the revolution that overthrew the dictator Fulgencio Batista. But soon after Fidel Castro had taken power in 1959, it was apparent that the promised democracy was not to be.

“A series of things led to my parents’ deciding to go,” says Gonzalez. “Things happened quickly. For my parents, the final straw was the government’s effort to take children from their families and send them to the countryside, ostensibly to increase literacy. People in the Cuban countryside were largely illiterate, so the theory was that the children would help educate the rural adult population. However, it was really an effort to break family bonds and cultural traditions and indoctrinate young people in the ways of the revolution. It was counter to everything my parents believed in.”

When the family applied for visas to leave Cuba, the government took inventory of their household belongings, which they were allowed to use until their departure but not to sell or give away. They were told to wait for a telegram that would let them know when they could leave.

**‘I remember riding my bike home from school and my mother standing outside saying, “Hurry, hurry—the telegram arrived!”’**

“I remember riding my bike home from school and my mother standing outside saying, ‘Hurry, hurry—the telegram arrived!’ We had forty-eight hours to report,” Gonzalez recalls.

“The night before we left, I awoke to strange noises in our house. Under cover of darkness, my father and friends were taking a mattress from our house to my grandmother’s. Our mattress was better than hers, but it had been inventoried. One of the things that evoked a lot of fear was neighborhood committees for defense of the revolution. Those committees could report you for doing something like switching a mattress.”

In their final hours in Cuba, the Gonzalez family bade goodbye to family and friends, who, most likely, they would never see again. At the airport, Elio Angel and Armantina were subjected to intensive searches. Armantina was terrified that the officials would find the few pieces of jewelry she had hidden among their belongings. Elio Angel faced a series of false accusations designed, he feared, to prevent the family from leaving.

Today, Elio Angel and Armantina Gonzalez are in their eighties, retired, and living in Miami. They spoke with *Bloom* by phone.

As Elio Angel remembers, “An official told me I couldn’t leave because I was a medical doctor. I had been working as a mechanic right up to the day we left, so I showed him my hands, which were full of grease,

and asked him if they looked like doctor’s hands. He left and then came back and said we could leave—but first I’d have to pay \$200 for a telephone bill we had left unpaid. I told him that was not possible, because we didn’t have a telephone. He banged on the desk and disappeared into the back office. When he came back, he said that it was a mistake, but we definitely had to leave the keys to the car. I told him we didn’t have a car either.”

At the final baggage inspection before the family was allowed to board the aircraft, another government official slashed Elio Angel’s duffle bag, causing its contents to spill out. The airplane was already at the gate, engine running. With their hearts racing, he and Gerardo scrambled to collect their belongings from the floor.

### Coming to America

On February 9, 1962, eight months before the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Gonzalez family arrived in Miami. They came with meager belongings, including two bottles of government-issued Bacardi rum, and no money. Elio Angel quickly sold the rum to a doorman at the Cuban refugee center for \$5.

Soon after their arrival, with the help of other refugees already settled in Miami’s Cuban community, Armantina found work in a factory. Elio Angel borrowed money to buy a few tools and a car in order to open a small auto repair shop.

“I wanted to make contacts and learn English and be able to work. That was my first priority,” Elio Angel says. “To us, this country was the greatest thing on earth, which of course turned out to be true.”

### Frozen in time

On May 15, 2012, Gerardo Gonzalez and the IU alumni group landed in Havana. The city has changed little since 1962. Automobiles from the 1950s, some in mint condition, cruise the city’s streets—largely because until very recently people could privately operate only those cars that were on the road before the 1959 revolution. Infrastructure has been neglected to the point that entire buildings are crumbling, with many elaborate Spanish colonial landmarks beyond restoration. Power outages are frequent and basic conveniences unreliable. Cubans have an all-purpose catchphrase to explain the situation: “Es Cuba”—It’s Cuba.

“It was like stepping back in time,” says Gonzalez. “There are centuries-old ways of doing things in Cuba. Seeing a bodega [a small convenience store] for the first time was a very emotional experience for me, because my grandfather operated a bodega. I would go there and pick up things that my mother needed—rice, beans, eggs—or just visit with my grandfather.” He pauses. “I hadn’t seen a bodega since I left Cuba.”



Vintage cars on the corner of El Prado, one of Havana’s main streets, May 2012. Photo by Doug Kutz



Gonzalez sits with a high priestess, or “santera,” in Old Havana. The woman is a practitioner of Santeria, an Afro-Cuban religion. Photo by Jorge Perez



Coffee-shop window in the colonial city of Trinidad. Photo by Gerardo Gonzalez

IU Alumni Association’s Hoosier Travelers group portrait. Gonzalez is in the front row, far right; Bob Cutter is standing next to him. Photo by Jorge Perez





(top) Gonzalez visiting Cuban third-graders during an English class and teaching them how to say “Hoosier.” Grade level is designated by scarf color; blue is for third grade. Photo by Doug Kutz

(below right) Gonzalez singing “La Bamba” with a mariachi band on his trip to Cuba. Photo by Suzie Kutz

Along with such everyday scenes, the group toured historic landmarks and UNESCO World Heritage sites such as La Habana Vieja, the 16th-century city center, and Cienfuegos, a 19th-century town considered an outstanding example of Latin American urban planning. They also visited the country’s leading art academy, the Instituto Superior de Arte; the Cuban National Ballet School; a health clinic to learn about Cuba’s socialized medicine program; Ernest Hemingway’s estate Finca Vigia; and the Museo de la Revolución. A member of the IU group and a veteran traveler, Bob Cutter, found the trip to be beyond his expectations. For that, he credits Gonzalez.

“The dean made it great,” says Cutter. “He sat at the front of the bus and would occasionally take the microphone from the guide and tell us details that only a Cuban would know. Sometimes things got kind of emotional for him, and his voice would crack. Sometimes we couldn’t find the dean right away, because he’d wander over and engage with people—we’d see him talking to a street sweeper or a santera [a priestess of the Cuban Santeria religion]. One day at lunch, the band came over to our table and wanted him to join in. So he took

the maracas and started singing ‘La Bamba’ with them.”

Gonzalez says he naturally gravitated to his fellow Cubans. “I spent most of my time just talking to people, whether in a museum or restaurant or on the street. They heartened me. I was impressed by their resilience and warmth and ability to overcome a very difficult set of circumstances,” he says. “The ‘dual’ economy forces many highly educated people to abandon their professions just to survive.”

#### The dual economy

In the official Cuban economy, workers are paid in pesos, which have very little buying power. A month’s salary of 400 pesos equals approximately 20 U.S. dollars. In the unofficial Cuban economy, people try to find work that pays them in the Cuban convertible peso (CUC), which has the value of one U.S. dollar and is the currency of the tourist industry.

“The level of entrepreneurship is incredible, because everyone wants access to CUCs and a higher standard of living,” Gonzalez says. “I had a conversation with an informatics professor who was selling trinkets to tourists on the side of the road. He told me that he can earn more in a day doing that than he can earn in a month working at the university. I met a nurse who was rolling cigars in a cigar factory, and she told me the same thing. The irony of the revolution is that it was supposed to create a classless society but has in fact created clear and distinct classes of people and is leading to increased levels of desperation and resentment over what many see to be a failed promise.”

#### From ‘troublemaker’ to dean

Seeing the plight of highly educated Cubans caused Gonzalez to reflect on his own education in the U.S. Young Gerardo was one of thousands of non-English-speaking Latino youths who had moved into Miami-Dade County in the early 1960s. His experience in the public school system was bewildering and painful.

“School administrators didn’t understand that it wasn’t just a language issue,” he says. “We found ourselves in a different culture with a different set of expectations. We were going through the turmoil of adjusting to a new life, but we became known as the class of troublemakers. One day, the vice principal came down to set us straight. Of course, I had no idea what he was saying, so I turned to one of my classmates who spoke better English than I, and said, ‘José, que dice ese hombre?’ ‘What’s that man saying?’ I was summarily suspended



Gonzalez and a group of fourth-grade students who are at recess, eating churros, a Cuban sweet treat. Red is the scarf color for fourth grade.

in a small raft to try to get it,” Gonzalez says. “My parents sacrificed everything that was dear to them. Talking with them reminded me of the truly important things in life. It reaffirmed my commitment to help my own children understand the importance of family, and how their own lives will be better because of the sacrifices their parents and grandparents made. Though my struggles pale in comparison to what my parents have gone through, I had to fight my own battles in order to attain an education and succeed in America. Now my children are educated and successful themselves. Their children, as well as their children’s children, will also have a greater chance of being successful because of the transformative power of education. None of this would have been possible except for the decision my parents made to leave Cuba.” ✨

for asking that question. That incident impacted my life as a student all the way through high school. I didn’t raise my hand or ask questions. I became invisible.”

Gonzalez was put on a vocational track, attending high school half days and working part time in a clothing store. After graduation, he had expected to get a job in the store, but a recession hit and the store closed. He had no plan B, but fate intervened in the form of a visiting friend.

“It was the summer of 1969, and a friend who was studying at the University of Puerto Rico was visiting. One day he said, ‘How about college?’ I had no concept of college. I literally did not understand the word,” Gonzalez remembers. “Fortunately, the Miami-Dade Community College had an open-door policy, and my family was so poor that I qualified for federal financial aid. Suddenly, I was reading existential philosophy and learning about the history of humankind. The desire to learn was awakened in me, and I couldn’t get enough.”

At the community college, Gonzalez met his wife-to-be, Marjorie Ann Reilly. They were married in Gainesville, Florida, where they moved after Gonzalez received his associate degree in 1971. He continued his education at the University of Florida, earning a bachelor’s degree in psychology, and subsequently master’s and doctoral degrees in counselor education. In 1978 Gonzalez was invited to join the faculty; he eventually rose to chair of the department. During their years in

Gainesville, the couple had four children, now all grown.

Gonzalez was interim dean of the University of Florida College of Education when he was hired by Indiana University in 2000 to become dean of the School of Education.

#### In the aftermath of the Cuba trip

Gonzalez was understandably thrilled with his visit to Cuba—with all that he saw and experienced. What he hadn’t anticipated was how the trip would affect his relationship with his parents. After his return, they shared with him, for the first time, details of their flight from Cuba.

“The conversation was remarkably easy,” Gonzalez says. “Both my mother and father were very direct and actually seemed to enjoy reminiscing about the details. At one point I asked my father whether he had ever regretted the decision to leave Cuba. Without hesitation, he immediately said, ‘No, no, no. At first it was difficult. But with each passing year we’ve developed and grown, especially you and your sister. Back there I remember you as a gallito [a small fighting cock], but here you’ve become a man. I would do it all over again.’”

That conversation, says Gonzalez, reinforced his belief in the value of the sacrifices that immigrant parents make for their children.

“In Cuba, people want freedom so badly they are willing to hurl themselves into the sea

For additional photos of Gerardo’s trip and a video of him singing “La Bamba,” go to

[magbloom.com/gonzalez](http://magbloom.com/gonzalez)



#### Want to see more of Cuba?

Pictura Gallery is hosting “Cuba Libre,” an exhibit of photographs taken in Cuba by Bloomington photographers Tyagan Miller and David Moore. Through November 30. Free.

On Wednesday October 17 at 7 pm, Gerardo Gonzalez will give a talk about his Cuban heritage and the recent trip he took to his birthplace. Free.

Pictura is located at 122 W. 6th St. on the north side of the downtown Square.

[picturagallery.com](http://picturagallery.com)