

Family of six made it out just in time

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Body

Struggling to adjust as immigrants, Pedro Veliz and his **family** already feel luckier than thousands of other Cuban rafters.

The **six** arrived one month before a presidential policy change closed a door long open to Cubans.

Had Veliz left in August instead of July - with his wife, their kids, and his two brothers - they'd be languishing in immigration limbo with 30,000 other refugees at the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Instead, in a two-bedroom apartment shared by 11, they're learning a new life and trying to forget the old one that **made** them leave.

"Imagine Cuba as if it were a father you love, but he beats you," says Veliz, 40, a sculptor who spent a year in prison in Cuba for trying to flee before. "This father doesn't feed you. He doesn't care for you. He doesn't let you develop into what you can be. You love him, but you have to leave."

Adds Miguel Angel, 38, a Cuban policeman punished for brother Pedro's escape attempts: "To get anywhere, one has to put Fidel Castro before **family**, before anything. Many come here not for economic reasons. Some do, but so many come because of the political repression."

The former policeman, worries about the wife and 15-year-old son he left behind: "It's a very poor place for the son of a defected police officer. Accidents happen."

Home - once the tiny Cuban fishing town of Isabela de Sagua about 150 miles east of Havana - now is Hialeah, population 188,000, a working-class suburb of Miami that's 77% Hispanic.

Since arriving July 21, their life has been a bewildering round of social-service agencies and bureaucracies:

-- Receiving a \$ 200 grant given each new arrival by Miami's church-run resettlement agencies.

-- Waiting for hours for a Social Security number.

-- Finding minimum-wage work making furniture or packing clothes in a factory.

-- Sending a nervous Maykel, 13, to his first day at a U.S. junior high school Thursday.

"I tell them things will come, little by little," says Consuelo Dominguez, principal at Hialeah's Henry Filer Middle School.

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When Maykel (say: Michael) is fearful because he knows only a word or two of English, Dominguez reassures him in Spanish he'll have plenty of company. In the first week of school, 103 new students enrolled in the most-basic English level for foreign-born students.

In the cramped apartment shared with Pedro's brother and his family - who arrived in Florida a year ago - a tiny TV tuned to a local cable station scrolls the names of Cubans at Guantanamo.

Like other Cubans who've made it here, the family watches for names of friends and relatives who were not so lucky.

The oldest of the brothers, Veliz brought the family on a 12-foot boat he built himself - part of a three-vessel, tied-together convoy of 19 Cubans and one dog.

Even before leaving the coast of Cuba, the group spent 15 days hiding out among the mangrove islands offshore, drinking rain water and eating fish while dodging Cuban patrol boats.

When it finally was safe to leave, they sailed for three days, then shipwrecked on a small rock island in the Florida Straits.

Spotted by a plane in the volunteer Cuban-American pilots' group known as Brothers to the Rescue, the refugees were reported to the U.S. Coast Guard. A day later, they were picked up and delivered to a new life in Florida.

Pedro's wife, Sonia Rodriguez, 31, says she can barely believe the USA's bounty: Home Depot, Kmart and supermarkets with real meat, milk and fruit. In Cuba, she says, grocery stores display pictures of food and offer empty shelves.

A church has offered used furniture, once they rent their own apartment. A Miami friend gave them cast-off clothing, adding a new pair of school sneakers for Maykel - a gift that would have cost a year's salary in Cuba.

"It makes me dizzy," she says. "There are so many things."

The biggest hurdle: Finding an affordable apartment. On a weekly salary of \$ 184, Pedro's brother Juan Carlos and his family were barely making ends meet in Hialeah before the others moved in.

But his wife, Maria Estevez, says they'll do whatever they can to help family: "What else would we do?"

Maykel Perez's middle school

Racial breakdown of the 1,701 students at Henry Filer Middle School in Hialeah, Fla., where Maykel Perez was registered Thursday:

Hispanics(1)	81.8%	(1,392)
Blacks	14.8%	(251)
Whites	3.0%	(51)
Asians	.4%	(7)

1 - Non-Hispanic whites

Notes

THE CARIBBEAN; See info box at end of text; See related story; 06A

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Graphic

GRAPHIC, b/w, Marty Baumann, USA TODAY, Source: Henry Filer Middle School (Bar graph, Map); PHOTO, b/w, Tom Salyer

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