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Exhibition chronicles Cuban exiles story

By Miami Herald Staff



PEDRO PORTAL / EL NUEVO HERALD STAFF

Elsa Lopez looks at her clothes and shoes she wore when she left Cuba with her parents at the age of two at the time. Her items are among several donated by Exiles on display at the VIP opening and presentation of the The Exile Experience: Journey to Freedom, at the Freedom Tower. The exhibit is a pictorial account of the struggles that the Cuban exile community has endured since Fidel Castro's rise to power, and the successes they have achieved in the United States, organized and curated by the Miami Dade College and The Miami Herald, on Wednesday September 10, 2014.

More than 1,000 people crammed into the Freedom Tower Wednesday night for a peek at an exhibition that honors one of the city's oldest buildings – and captures the tales of hundreds of thousands of Cubans who fled the island and made Miami their new home.

The Exile Experience: Journey to Freedom — produced by Miami Herald Media Company newsroom staffers in partnership with curators at Miami Dade College Museum of Art + Design (MOAD) — is a journalistic chronology of various waves of Cubans who fled communist indoctrination following Fidel Castro's rise to power in 1959. It is also an homage to a historic building, which housed the city's first daily newspaper and later became the main processing center for the new Cuban arrivals.

"I am extremely proud of this exhibition," said Alexandra Villoch, president and publisher of the Miami Herald Media Company. "Not only because it honors journalism by paying tribute to a building that stands as a monument to the history of news reporting in South Florida. But also because it tells the tale of an important segment of our community that both overcame the hardship of exile and continues to thrive in exile."

"It is truly an honor to partner with Miami Dade College to preserve an important piece of our community's story in a historic gem that can now be enjoyed by the public at large," Villoch said.

The Freedom Tower, which opened its doors in 1925, was home to the Miami Daily News, later known as The Miami News.

In 1962, five years after the newspaper found a new building by the Miami River, the U.S. government leased the tower to process the growing number of exiles fleeing Castro's Cuba. For them, the building — commonly referred to as El Refugio — became the Ellis Island of the Cold War era until it closed in 1974.

The building was donated to Miami Dade College in 2007 by 600 Biscayne LLC and developer Pedro Martin and family, and has since been restored to accommodate cultural activities and special events that are free and open to the public.

“The exile experience is well known to many in our community, and the Exile Experience exhibition at the Freedom Tower is sure to touch the lives of people throughout our community,” said Eduardo J. Padrón, president of Miami Dade College. “It marks a new chapter in the history of this iconic landmark, a moving homage to freedom and democracy. We’re extremely grateful for the partnership with the Miami Herald in presenting this exhibition, which is the first in a series that chronicles the experiences that changed so many lives.”

The exhibition begins with the first mass exodus out of Cuba, the children from Operation Pedro Pan. It was designed by Herald graphic artist Ana Lense Larrauri and written by Herald editorial writer Luisa Yanez, is composed largely of photos from Miami Herald archives, Barry University, Operation Pedro Pan Group Inc. and the Cuban Heritage Collection at the University of Miami. It is accompanied by footage from the Lynn and Louis Wolfson II Florida Moving Image Archives at Miami Dade College and the following films: The Flight of Pedro Pan and My Suitcase Full of Hope by Joe Cardona, The Lost Apple, produced by the United States Information Agency, 1962-63 and 50 Years of Exile, presented by Univision23, and produced and directed by Norberto Perdomo.

The Exile Experience: Journey to Freedom opens to the public Sept. 19 as part of the reopening of (MOAD) and kickoff of the cultural season at the college. The event will include six new exhibitions and a free concert by popular local band, PALO! Festivities begin at 6 p.m. at the Freedom Tower, 600 Biscayne Blvd. For more information, visit www.mdcmoad.org