

Cuban LGBT dissidents visiting Miami: Don't believe Mariela Castro about gay rights on the island

BY STEVE ROTHHAUS, srothaus@MiamiHerald.com



LGBT Cuban couple Ignacio Estrada Cepero and Wendy Iriepa are visiting Miami. Roberto Koltun / El Nuevo Herald.

Eight weeks after Cuban leader Raúl Castro's daughter, Mariela, received a gay equality award in Philadelphia, two of the island's best-known LGBT dissidents are in Miami warning American activists not to believe what she says.

"I want to say to the LGBT community of the United States, don't let Mariela fool you," said Cuban activist Wendy Iriepa, a transgender woman who used to work with Castro at CENESEX, the Cuban National Center for Sex Education. "Don't let the American community be used, as she is using you right now with the LGBT community in Cuba."

Iriepa and husband Ignacio Estrada Cepero, a gay man, will participate Tuesday night in a Spanish-language discussion about gay rights in Cuba at Miami Dade College's Wolfson Campus.

With permission of the Cuban government, the Havana couple arrived in Miami June 26 and will spend three months in the United States interacting with South Florida activists. "We are living a dream, confronting the Cuban society, to suddenly come to the United States and see

everything that has been negated and denied and prohibited by the Cuban government," Estrada said.

An advocate for gay marriage and transgender equality, sexologist Mariela Castro has been a highly visible gay-rights figure in Cuba, where until several years ago LGBT people were treated as outcasts and often sent to hard-labor camps.

Some Cuban Americans protested in May when Castro was honored at the gay Equality Forum in Philadelphia, and the year before when she spoke to LGBT activists in San Francisco and at the New York Public Library.



“Everything is fake, it’s false,” Iriepa said of Castro’s portrayal of modern-day Cuba. “The gays still feel repression. When the police come, they say you have to leave here. Mariela sells to the world the same image the Cuban government does. Everything from the outside looks beautiful, but when you go inside, everything is not.”

Iriepa said that for years she sought sex reassignment surgery, but didn’t get it until she pledged loyalty to the Castro regime.

“In 1997, the director of CENESEX gave me a letter,” she told the Miami Herald on Monday. “The letter said in order to have the

operation, you have to maintain a socially correct and revolutionary — support the government.”

Ten years later, the Cuban government paid for Iriepa’s surgery, part of a pilot program added to the island’s universal healthcare system. “I don’t recognize that the Cuban government paid for my operation,” she said. “I had been waiting for that for years. They finally did it.”

In 2011, Iriepa and Estrada celebrated a highly publicized wedding. “We are the first gay couple,” she said.

Despite speaking out against the Cuban government during their U.S. visit, Iriepa and her husband plan to return next fall to the island.

“We are people who have a life project,” Estrada said. “We have a group of people who identify with us. We are the most visible face of the Cuban LGBT community.”

IF YOU GO

What: Conversation in Spanish with Cuban LGBT activists Wendy Iriepa and Ignacio Estrada Cepero

When: 7:30 p.m. Tuesday

Where: Miami Dade College Wolfson Campus, Room 7128, 500 NE Second Ave.

Cost: Free

Posted by Steve Rothaus at 04:50 PM in [AIDS and Health](#), [Bisexual](#), [Business,Current Affairs](#), [Florida](#), [Gay](#), [Lesbian](#), [LGBT](#), [Marriage](#), [Media](#), [Miami & Miami-Dade County](#), [Miami Beach](#), [Politics](#), [Religion](#), [South Florida](#), [Transgender](#), [Weblogs](#), [Workplace](#), [Youth](#)