

Reflections on Ana Perez-Arrieta, '05 J.D. making a difference

I will never forget the look on the faces of the two Cuban refugees as they stepped out of the terminal at the South Bend airport. Even though it was 11:00 p.m. on a Wednesday night and everyone had to work the next day, about ten members from the Mennonite Church in Elkhart, Indiana, where the refugees were being placed, were waiting to greet them. In addition, there were three workers from the

Refugee Services office in South Bend and two Cuban refugees that had only been living in the U.S. for about three months. I was there to translate for the Refugee Services workers as part of my community service project for Professor Szweda's Immigration Law class. Although the Refugee Services office has several Spanish translators, they called me because my parents are also refugees from Cuba, and I grew up speaking "Cuban Spanish" at home.



While we were waiting for the refugees to arrive, we learned from the Refugee Services workers that the refugees were father and son. The father had been held as a political prisoner in Cuba for seven years for being a human rights activist and for speaking out against Castro's government. Because the Cuban government tries to rid itself of political dissidents, the father was asked to leave Cuba and take his entire family with him. Unfortunately, this "request" by

the government carries a large fee: the Cuban government charges \$500

U.S. dollars per person for processing an exit application and completing a required medical exam. This is an incredible amount of money for the average Cuban worker who receives, at best, \$14 U.S. dollars per month from the state. It was no small miracle that the father had been able to afford to bring his son with him.

After traveling nonstop for two days and then making stops in Cancun, Miami, and Chicago, the father and son finally arrived in South Bend. My impression was that both were completely shocked and overwhelmed by the reception they received at the airport. As the translator and spokesperson for the group, I stepped forward and welcomed them with a smile. After muttering a few incomplete sentences in English and Spanish, the father, a proud and dignified man, introduced himself and his son by name and then explained that he was a biologist and his son a veterinarian.

After I identified the role that each of us had, we all sat down on the airport sofas to help the father and son fill out the necessary immigration and Social Security forms. When the Refugee Services workers handed each of them a twenty-dollar bill, I thought the father was going to cry. He looked as though he had just been handed a precious gem. Sensing the father's reaction, the Refugee Services worker explained that the twenty-dollar bill was not worth as much as it would have been in Cuba.

When I asked if they had any questions, they said yes. The father wanted to know when they could start to work, and the son asked when they could start taking English classes. I was struck by the fact that the only thing the two men wanted to know was how they could become contributing members of their new country, even though they were completely exhausted and had just walked off the plane after traveling for two days.

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Before we departed, the father told me that he had something he wanted to tell the entire group, and he wanted me to translate. I asked everyone to gather around, and the father began to speak. He said he expected maybe one person to be at the airport to direct them, but he never imagined that a group would be waiting for their arrival. He expressed his gratitude for the warm reception.

He then spoke about how difficult it had been to leave his native land, but he said he felt like he had no choice because he could no longer live under an oppressive regime, nor could he witness further human rights violations.

At one point during the translation, I choked up because I began to imagine what it must feel like for refugees like my parents and—more immediately, for this father and son—to leave their families behind to start a new life in a foreign country, not knowing the language and having virtually nothing except a strong work ethic. That night, I began to feel a new connection to the father and son and the other Cuban refugees that had been in the U.S. for only a few months; even though I have never been to Cuba, we were all from the same place.

As it turns out, meeting these Cuban refugees and hearing their stories about life in Cuba is one of my most memorable experiences in law school. Before I began my service project, I thought it would involve no more than driving to the airport and serving as a translator for a few hours. In reality, much more happened to me that night. I was reminded that we, as lawyers, can do much more than read, research, and write. If we step outside of our bubble, whether it is on a full-time or pro bono basis, we can change lives. Perhaps that night is memorable to me because I feel like I made a difference.