

I am an assistant research professor at the University of Miami medical school's Mailman Center for Child Development, however, previously in the mid '90s I was a return Peace Corps volunteer from Paraguay, South America and was tasked via the Department of Justice after I left my service in the Peace Corps to work with the Cuban balseros who were in Guantanamo Bay in 1994 and 1995.

I was basically a social worker there. My main responsibility was to help set up the school systems in each of the camps because at the time we really did not know how long we were going to have Cubans living at the base on Guantanamo. It really was kind of who came off the coast guard cutter that day. So you had singles in the camps; you had single women, single men. You had unaccompanied children but in terms of the families, a lot of families would be separated, not intentionally but by accident, because there could be up to 5,000 Cubans arriving at the base in just one morning.

[Now you mentioned unaccompanied children. how did those children get placed in the camp? In the Guantanamo camp?]

Well they were more isolated from the adult population so they were really kept together and most of them were adolescent males around fifteen/sixteen. Some of them just kind of got in the water, or on a boat on a whim without really thinking about it. So that is the way it was kind of handled in the Cuban camp. In the Haitian camp - because at the same time there were about 16,000 Haitians on the other side of the base. Those unaccompanied children were much younger so they lived in their own camp with Haitian women as their primary caregivers.

You know, we have the wet foot/dry foot policy for Cubans and so all of the unaccompanied Cuban children were brought to the US and placed in the unaccompanied refugee minors program which is very similar to the state child welfare system. They go and they live with a foster family and they go to school until they turn eighteen and they get a number of resources. However, the US government did not at the time nor does it now have the same policy for Haitian children so all the Haitian children were returned to Haiti and placed in orphanages if they could not find their families.

Stories. There was a young man who got on one of the boats as a whim and got to Guantanamo and he wanted to be sent back to Cuba and there was no mechanism to return him to his family in Cuba. And then some of the Haitian children, some of them became unaccompanied. I remember one little girl... she was about ten or eleven whose father became very ill and they medically [evacuated] up here to Jackson Memorial and [he] passed away. So she became an unaccompanied child as a result of the passing of her father.

I think the most important thing as it relates to Cubans in setting up refugee camps is that the US military was extremely kind and understanding. They worked very hard to make it the most comfortable scenario that they could for the balseros as well as the Haitians and that they were really... they wanted to make sure that everybody got the medical care they needed, that

everybody got their basic needs met, that families were unified, that people were safe and secure and so the Guantanamo that I remember and that I know does not seem like the same Guantanamo of today.