

# Ninety Miles to Advantage

## The Journey Begins

“Only the boy can go.” Those stark words, from the mouth of the Cuban official that day at the Havana Airport, changed my life forever. It was the morning of Monday, July 1, 1962, and I was only ten years old.

My family was waiting to board a flight to Miami—my dad, Rafael; my mother, Andrea; my little sister, Barbara; and me. After months on a waiting list, we had been approved to leave Cuba and go to the United States. We had said good-byes to our relatives. The time to leave was getting short. Then a man in uniform appeared and spoke to my father. I sensed there was something wrong.

He said there were irregularities with our family’s departure documents, except for mine. Suddenly my parents had a wrenching decision to make. Either we all would stay in Cuba until the

paperwork was untangled, or they would send me alone and would follow as soon as possible.

My aunt Mercedes was with us at the airport. She had a friend who already had gotten out of Cuba and was in Miami. A phone call reached the friend (miraculously), who agreed to meet my plane and look after me for a few days until my mother, father, and sister arrived.

For a boy my age, all of this was a little scary but also exciting. It had the feel of an adventure. Walking across the tarmac, I looked back at my parents and sister to give them one last wave. Very shortly, I believed, we would be reunited and starting a new life in America. It was my last sight of my family for four years.

## A Courageous Decision

My parents' decision to put me on that plane alone was the embarkation point of the journey this book describes. All that I believe today about how to make the most out of life traces back to that event, and to the months and years that followed as I learned to cope with obstacles, and turn them into opportunity.

I came to write *Obstacles Welcome* because of how people react to my story. Through my years as an executive for BellSouth, Bell Communications Research, Cingular Wireless, and now AT&T, I have given a lot of speeches. Afterward, as I have conversation with people in the audience, I always find that what has resonated most with them is how far I have come. While they are interested in my business experience (like integrating AT&T Wireless and

Cingular following the biggest all-cash merger in U.S. history), it is the personal saga that captivates them.

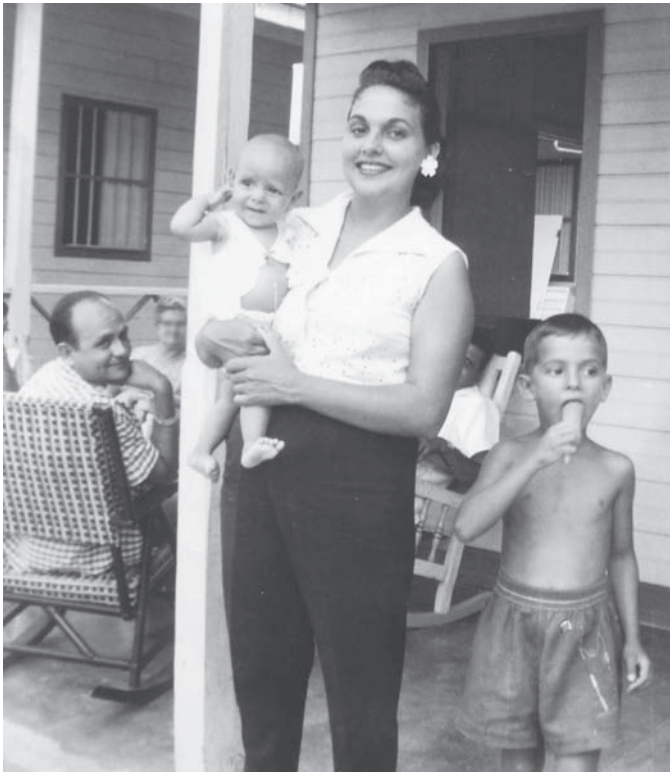
In particular, they are moved by the idea of a young boy whose family was so determined to get him out of communist Cuba, that they sent him off alone, into the care of a couple whom they barely knew. People look at me and then try to envision me as the teenager who swept floors and cleaned bathrooms in order to help his family and put himself through college. They take heart that that same child, and that same teenager, has gone on to become the president and CEO of AT&T Mobility, the wireless subsidiary of AT&T, the number one telecommunications company in America.

They want to know how I did it.

That is what I am going to explain here—so that you might grow in your own life by taking some of the same steps. The same guideposts I used then and continue to use now can make self-fulfillment and high achievement possible for you as well. They provide the foundation that will allow you to reach your most ambitious goals.

### A World Turned Upside Down

In the Cuba I recall before the revolution, the de la Vegas were a conventional middle-class Cuban family. My father ran a wholesale grocery business. He worked hard and was prosperous. My mother would be called, in today's America, a "stay-at-home mom" for Barbara and me. We had many aunts and uncles who spoiled us with presents.



The de la Vega family at a beach house. *In the summer we would take vacations at the beach. In this picture, my mother is holding my sister, Barbara, while I enjoy an ice cream cone and show off my physique. That's my father in the background.*

In the pivotal year of 1959, when Castro took control, I was seven years old. The changes came quickly, and they hit hard for a close-knit family that held a strong work ethic, traditional values, and religious faith. Like millions of others, from that time on, we lived in a state of constant uncertainty and anxiety.

The freedom we had known was gone, replaced by intimidation and confiscation of property. Food distribution was taken over by the government, so my father's business was gone. Every family was given a *libreta*, or ration book, for food which became increasingly scarce. At school—including former private schools now run by the government—the staff would challenge us to pray to God for ice cream or small change. When no ice cream or money materialized, we were told to pray to Fidel for the same. At that point, the miracle of ice cream or small change would appear very quickly.



(Map courtesy of Central Intelligence Agency)

*My journey began during the Cuban Revolution. Fidel Castro overthrew the government of Fulgencio Batista on January 1, 1959, and installed a socialist regime, dramatically changing the political, social, and economic fabric of the country. Located ninety miles from the United States, directly south of Key West Florida, Cuba has a population of 11 million people.*

Most troubling of all were the fear and distrust that pervaded everyday life. Although no one in my close family was imprisoned, thousands of our countrymen had been locked up—and it could

happen to anyone at the slightest provocation, or just a suspicion. In the community, you didn't know who among your neighbors might be watching and listening on behalf of the government. Sometimes our family had extra food through my dad's old business connections—and my mother would cook it in the middle of the night when no neighbors were awake. At school, we were told to report to our teacher if we ever heard an adult, including our parents, criticize the government. The strategy was simple—undermine loyalty to anyone and anything other than Castro and the regime.

Families like mine who had a young son had an extra worry. Boys nearing draft age (fifteen) would not be allowed to leave Cuba. There were also constant rumors swirling that Cuban boys

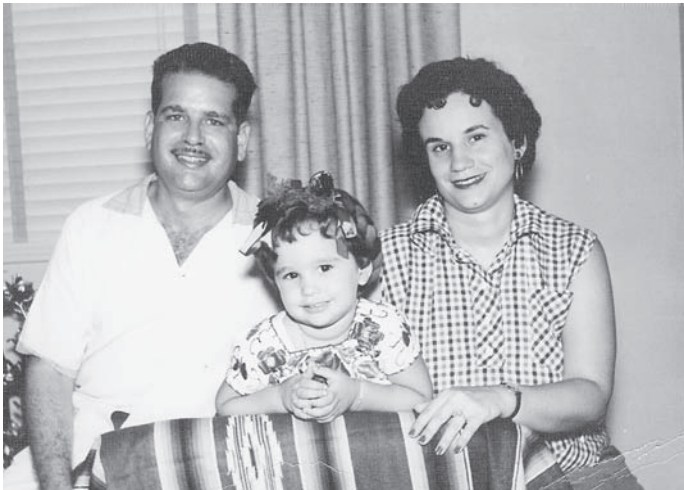


*The de la Vega family in the late 1950s. My father, Rafael; my mother, Andrea; and my sister, Barbara. (In coordinated shirt, pants, and shoes, I appear to be on my best behavior.)*

were going to be sent off to Moscow to be educated. More than any other danger, the fear of losing their children—soul as well as body—motivated families like mine to try to get out.

Applying to leave the country was a dangerous thing, however. You marked yourself as a *gusano*—a “worm.” Almost immediately, militia would show up at your house and inventory all your possessions. They made it clear they would be back at the time of your departure, and every item must still be in the house. You had to leave all your possessions behind.

My wife, Maria, has even more vivid memories of these times than I do. Her family also were *gusanos*. Her father had been an accountant, and her mother had been a teacher at St. George’s School in Havana. When the government took control of the school, her mother quit rather than wear fatigues and teach curriculum that was little more than propaganda. The family



*My wife, Maria, with her parents, José Joaquín and Berta Martínez.*

continued to attend Mass in spite of the government's open hostility to religion, and Maria remembers being in church one day when armed militia burst in, yelling and demanding that everyone get out. The priest continued with the ritual. No one moved. The militia left.



*At the Halloween party at St. George's School in Havana, Maria dressed as a cat (far right). The Castro government took control of the school, forcing the faculty to wear fatigues and teach propaganda. Berta, Maria's mother, resigned her teaching position.*

In January 1963, her family received a telegram that on the following day, they could sail on a Red Cross ship. Maria remembers the militia coming for the second inventory. Her mother, Berta, had a beautiful sweater, which a female militia member obviously planned to claim for herself. She told Maria's mother,

“I did not have nice things like this before Fidel.” Then she told her to hand over the sweater.

Just before boarding the *Shirley Lykes* with other thankful *gusanos*, Maria’s family had to pass one last checkpoint. The militia riffled through the few possessions the family was allowed to take. Maria was carrying her beloved doll, a Mariquita Pérez doll with dark hair and shining eyes like Maria’s own. A guard demanded to examine it. Turning the doll over in his hands, he told his companion that the head should be torn off to make sure nothing valuable was stashed inside. Maria began to cry. The guard looked down at her and returned her doll undamaged—a rare humane act in the tension and hostility of those times.



*Here is Maria at home in Cuba. On the bed is her favorite doll, a Mariquita Pérez doll made in Spain. It was one of the few possessions Maria had with her when preparing to board the Shirley Lykes in Havana Harbor. When a guard suggested tearing the doll’s head off to look for contraband, Maria’s tears moved him to return the doll unharmed.*