Family Portrait, With Fidel

June 1, 2000 By Gonzalo Aburto

My hotel room's balcony affords a view of the park, dotted with Elián Gonzáles posters fading in the harsh sun. I have finally made it to Cuba.

I am here for the Fourth International Conference on HIV/AIDS in Cuba, Central America and the Caribbean. I've been anxious for a glimpse of the "last socialist holdout" of the Western hemisphere, but right now I am exhausted. To guarantee that POZ en Español, which I edit, would arrive in time for the conference, I stuffed 500 copies in a suitcase and lugged the weight from New York City to my native Mexico and now to here. (The airline charged $150 in overweight fees. ·Dios mio!)

After a rest, I meet up with Jairo Pedraza, a friend and conference organizer. He has been in Havana for weeks and is ready to give me a tour. The first stop is at what was once one of the most majestic mansions in the Vedado neighborhood and is now the Center for the Prevention of STDs. Director Rosaida Ochoa tells me of the HIV prevention programs offered in a country where more than half of its 11 million people are under 30. She is most proud of a new volunteer hotline.

When I go to the conference, I am joined by 400 other delegates from all over the world. But most in attendance are Cubans. There are no handouts and pamphlets— paper is too valuable here and word of mouth is how information is passed. And there is a rumor flitting between workshops that Cuba has started production of protease inhibitors to circumvent the embargo. When I ask Jairo about it, he says that the same rumor made the rounds at the 1997 conference.

With Carlitos Borbón, a young writer, I take a break and a trip to the Santiago de las Vegas Sanitarium, the infamous SIDAtorium. For some time, it was his home. As we approach, he tells me that there has finally been a change in the official policy of quarantine—a stay is now voluntary and limited to six months. During that time, each person is reportedly taught about coping with their HIV status. Later, they are free to return home and resume their lives. Anyone testing positive is legally assured a year's paid leave and protection against firing. We visit the ward for terminally ill patients, and when I see them, I am struck by what they must see—a tourist stopping off at one more in a long list of spots of interest. And I look down, embarrassed.

The next day, I go to see the quilt of "Project Memories" unfurled before the Capiotolio, in the heart of Old Havana. My favorite is a simple sheet embroidered with a silver Farewell to Vulgarity and a name. It is something my friends would have loved. I wonder what el viejo, Fidel, thinks.

During the closing session, Carlitos does a monologue as a farewell. When he delivers his last lines and the audience rises to a standing ovation, I realize that this is not the end. Carlitos will continue to write, and I know that the story will have a happy ending. When I return to New York City, Elián is still making the front page. I miss my family, too.

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