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## Cuban-born Williston woman celebrates Fidel Castro's death



**Rosie Diaz Gutierrez holds the 50-year-old stuffed horse that was her only toy in Cuba. Photo by Terry Witt © Dec. 3, 2016 at 8:37 p.m.**

**By Terry Witt Senior Reporter © Dec. 3, 2016 at 8:37 p.m.**

**LEVY COUNTY** -- Rosie Diaz Gutierrez rejoiced on Nov. 25 when she heard Cuban President Fidel Castrol had died.

The Williston resident lived in Cuba as a young girl when Castro imprisoned the island nation in the yoke of Communism.

After Castro's demise, Gutierrez was chatting with a few of her Williston friends when she was asked how she felt about the Cuban leader's death. She vowed to celebrate with a beer. She would have puffed on a Cuban cigar if she had one.

"He died 60 years too late," she said. "It would have been great if the revolution had never taken hold."

In her bedroom, Gutierrez keeps a memento of her childhood in Cuba. The stuffed horse was her only toy when she lived in Cuba as a small child. Few toys could be found on the impoverished island nation. Food, water and electricity were rationed. Communism brought hardships.

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**Zoila Diaz was a dedicated mother who escaped with her family from Cuba in 1969. She never forgot Cuba but she loved her adopted homeland, the United States and worked hard to be successful.**

Her mother, Zoila Diaz, was hard worker who envisioned her children growing up free in the United States, a nation she had visited once before Castro took control of the country. She desperately wanted to move to America.



**Pictured on their wedding day are Zoila Diaz and her husband Felix.**

When Rosie was 4 years old, Zoila and her husband Felix walked out of their home with their two sons and Rosie. They headed for a series of safe houses that would conceal them as they

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carefully made their way to the airport. Their escape took place in April of 1969.

In the year before departure, Zoila had worked hard to secure an American visa for the family. The irony, as she well knew, was that the Cuban government wouldn't honor the visa. Cubans were forbidden to leave the island. Zoila knew the consequences would be severe for attempting to leave the island.

"If they found you were going to leave they would throw you in jail," she said. "She took a big chance."

When they walked away from their home, the family left all their possessions and the remaining family members. Gutierrez was carried by her mother. Her younger brother, Jose Agustin, was carried by his father. Her older brother Jorge walked with his parents. The family took along jewelry to pay the safe house owners. On the final leg of the journey, the family was given a car to drive to the airport, but the vehicle caught fire along the way.

The family hid in a ditch until a bright red and white convertible came along. The American couple in the car offered to take them to the airport.



**Rosie Diaz Gutierrez' grandparents owned this farm in the rustic Cuban countryside. The Cuban government took ownership of the property and flooded most of it. What you see in this photo is the remaining portion of the farm.**

The family boarded one of the last Freedom Flights out of Cuba, an American commercial airliner destined for Miami International Airport. They weren't allowed to take along any personal possessions. Rosie was forced to leave her beloved stuffed horse behind with family members. Zoila had been told by her brother Octavio, a student at the University of Miami, not to worry about anything. He would take care of them.

The family arrived with a small amount of Cuban currency in their possession, equal to about \$100 American currency. Later on, Gutierrez's mother arranged for a friend to obtain the stuffed horse from the family in Cuba and fly it back to the little Rosie. Her mother paid for the woman's air flight to bring the stuffed toy to the little girl, a tidy sum considering round trip air fares at the time were perhaps \$1000.

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“The first thing I had when I came to the United States was an ice cream sandwich,” Gutierrez recalled. “And I had never seen a hamburger.”

Octavio treated them to a meal at Burger King after the Freedom Flight. That’s where Gutierrez became acquainted with American hamburgers.

## LIFE IN CUBA

Cuba is the land of eternal summer, an island nation of hills, mountains, valleys, jungles, farmlands, sandy beaches and deserts. Gutierrez describes the Island as a place of intense beauty contrasted against the extreme poverty of its people. When Castro assumed control it became a country of snitches. People would secretly report activities of their neighbors to gain influence with government officials.



**Family members cross a river the once flowed through farm owned by the grandparents of Rosie Diaz Gutierrez.**

When Castro assumed power, Cuba lost its manufacturing plants and most of its jobs, Gutierrez said. The Communist government seized control of private farms including the 40-hectare farm of Gutierrez grandfather. One hectare is about the size of a soccer stadium.

After seizing control of the property, the government flooded most of it and used the big lake for racing boats. Gutierrez’ grandmother refused to leave until one of her sons arrived in a boat and insisted she board the vessel. By then water was lapping at her doorstep.

The water covered all but 8 hectares of the farm. The remaining dry acreage was under government control. The family could never claim ownership. Her grandmother, emotionally crushed by the brutal theft of her family’s land by the government fell into perpetual silence.

“She never spoke again,” Gutierrez said. “Her heart was broken. She never said anything to anyone.”

When Castro overthrew American backed Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista Zaldivar he promised to clean up the corruption and bring prosperity to the island nation, but he made false promises. He became the new dictator of Cuba, Gutierrez said. The Island lost its flourishing economy. The island had been called the Pearl of the Caribbean.

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Food was in such short supply under Castro's regime that people were forced to make-do with less. Gutierrez said her mother's cousin, Lele, used her two story apartment to raise a pig in one of the upstairs bedrooms. Meat was scarce and the family didn't dare let the government know they were raising a pig for meat.

When the time came to slaughter the pig, they tied the pig's mouth shut to muffle the squeals. The meat gave the family protein to eat for the next couple of weeks. The joke around Havana for many years was that you would never see a dog or a cat. Meat was a precious commodity.

Gutierrez said one her uncles owned a cattle farm but wasn't allowed to sell or eat the cattle. When his family grew hungry, he decided to butcher one of his cows to feed them. The Cuban government learned what happened and arrested him. He was thrown into prison "and never saw the light of day again," she said.

"The revolution owned the cows," she said.

Gutierrez said her father didn't join the Cuban Army and was put in work camps. The workers performed mostly agricultural work but sometimes rebuilt bridges and roads. He was away from his family much of the time.

"It was a kind of forced labor thing. My mother realized the Castro's promises had not been honored," she said.

Gutierrez visited Cuba three times in the 1980's. With each visit she saw the buildings and the people declining. Her final visit was in 1986.

Zoila Diaz and her family lived in a small town in central Cuba known as Consolacion Del Sur. She would load her children on a rickety old train once a month for the trip to Havana. Among other things, she would work on obtaining an American visa in Cuba's capital city.

In 1968 she learned the visa had been approved. She knew she would be heading for the United States. But her husband was in a work camp. She gave him an ultimatum. She was going to America. He could go with her. It was his choice. They left Cuba as a family.

In the states, Gutierrez said her family members were successful. Her mother founded a restaurant opposite the Orange Bowl. Her brother Octavio operates one of the most successful real estate companies in Miami, Mid Town Realty.

But the desire to bring other family members to the states was never far from her mother's mind. When the Mariel Boatlift occurred in 1980, Zoila chartered a 42- foot fishing boat to pick up a second brother and his family in Cuba. Octavio piloted the boat.

When the time came to board, the son her brother, who was military age was pulled off the boat. His parents stayed with him. Two other family members made the trip to Miami. Those who couldn't go to the states later immigrated to Costa Rica.

Zoila's brother Octavio told of a "wall of people" waiting to get off the island during the Mariel Boatlift. Many dived in the water and swam to boats. Octavio wound up with 120 people on his boat. He feared they would be swamped on the way to Miami. He was badly overloaded. They safely reached Miami.

While it's true Castro emptied his prisons and mental institutions for the Mariel Boatlift, Gutierrez said there were a lot of good people who came to the states for a better life during the massive exodus from Cuba.

Gutierrez became a United States citizen between 1979 and 1981. Her mother also became an American citizen as did the other members of her family.

She appreciates the great sacrifices made by her mother and the dangers she faced bringing her family to the Miami area.

"The reason my mother left Cuba was her family. Everything she owned was left in Cuba," Gutierrez said.