Cuban family welcomes new life in Lafayette

By ROBERT BUCKMAN
Special to The Advocate

LAFAYETTE — Ask 22-year-old Yoel Almanza his opinion on his new home in Louisiana and he replies unhesitatingly, “Es un paraíso,” or “It’s a paradise.”

A parade? If that testimonial to Lafayette seems exaggerated, it isn’t. At least not from the perspective of Almanza, his father, his sister and his uncle, all of whom fled Cuba on a crude raft a year ago, survived a brush with death at sea, then spent eight months in the U.S. detention camp at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, before being granted permission to enter the United States in April.

Sponsored by the Diocese of Lafayette, the Almanzas and several other Cuban families were provided with jobs and apartments in Lafayette and, like generations of other immigrants before them, have begun building new lives in their adopted land.

Yoel Almanza, his 18-year-old sister, Yaina, and their 23-year-old uncle, José Luis Gutierrez, all work at Pancho’s Mexican Buffet. The family patriarch, Miguel Angel Almanza, 46, is a cook at Tampico’s.

The men hold a second job at a carwash. The family lives in a tidy two-bedroom apartment on South College within walking distance of Pancho’s. The father bikes the four miles to Tampico’s.

The family’s ordeal is a familiar one. Stultified by the lack of consumer goods, freedom and opportunity in Fidel Castro’s Cuba, they carefully planned their escape to the United States.

The elder Almanza explained that they collaborated with another family, sold their house and belongings and raised about $70,000 that they paid to a swindler who had offered to get them to the United States but instead took off with their money.

Desperate, the two families then began constructing a raft of inner tubes in secret. It was a time of unprecedented mass unrest against the Castro regime.

“Things turned really bad for Fidel,” recalled Miguel Angel Almanza, who had worked 24 years in a cooking-oil plant in Havana. “For the first time in the 33 years of that gentleman’s revolution, the people went to the streets and broke shop windows. The people confronted the police with rocks and sticks.”

— Miguel Angel Almanza, Cuban refugee

ing the families in Guantanamo. Because Yaina was 17, or a minor, the Almanzas and Gutierrez, the brother of Miguel Angel Almanza’s first wife, were given a higher priority.

On April 27, they were flown to Miami, where they were put in a small hotel.

“After three days, we were told that our destination was Louisiana, because in this state there was a sponsor,” said Miguel Angel Almanza.

Although they conceded that the language barrier had proved a problem, the men all expressed enthusiasm for their jobs. Also making a positive impression were the supermarkets; under Cuba’s rationing system they had been allowed 1½ pounds of beef and five pounds of rice per person per month and one piece of bread per day.

“Jose Luis and I went to the store and we were like a couple of kids,” laughed Yoel Almanza. “I’d be saying, ‘Look at this! Look at that!’”

Asked what they liked best about Lafayette, the father and son answered almost in unison, “The tranquility.”

Despite their happiness, the younger generation of the family shows more enthusiasm over leaving their old lives behind than does the patriarch, who said he admires Cuba’s education system and free health care. He also expressed concern over what he calls “the moral decay of the young” that he sees in his adopted land, particularly drug use.

“If my country could be free again but at the price of moral decay, I’d rather see Fidel Castro stay in power 200 years,” said the elder Almanza.

He insisted that if Castro were to fall, “I’d return to Cuba immediately. We Cubans shouldn’t have to leave our country. We should be in Cuba where we belong.

“Things weren’t so bad for me in Cuba,” he added, “I never went hungry. I had a car. I left for my children.”

What is it then, that he hopes his children will gain by coming to the United States?

“La vida que quieren,” he said simply. The life that they want.