
Can Tampa ever reconnect with Havana?

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If your ancestors emigrated from Europe, you might trace your roots to Ellis Island in the early 1900's. If you're a Cuban American from Tampa, your Ellis Island is likely Ybor City around the same time.

Many Cuban Americans' ancestors likely arrived in Tampa on a steamer from Havana to work in the cigar industry. They arrived long before Castro's communist revolution in 1959.

Tampa native and Cuban American Mario Nunez wants to find the birthplace of his grandfather, born in Cuba in 1892.

"Somebody who has Irish ancestry, Chinese ancestry, they can go to their mother country and find the land from where their grandparents came. I'm restricted from doing that," lamented Nunez.

THE LONG EMBARGO

He's restricted by the U.S.A.'s embargo on Cuba imposed in 1962. Many Cubans who left the Island around the time Castro took power in 1959 continue to support the embargo, but many Cuban Americans in Tampa, some of them third- or fourth-generation Americans, have a different view.

"We've tried [the embargo] for 53 years," said Victor Rudy DiMaio, whose Cuban grandmother came to Tampa in the early 1900's.

He supports lifting the embargo and restoring the historic connection between Tampa and Havana. Port Tampa Bay is the closest deep water port to Havana.

"And I don't mean just an opportunity to make money," says DiMaio. "I see an opportunity to reconnect."

TAMPA-HAVANA RECONNECTION?

Nunez says he doesn't expect the embargo to be lifted overnight, but he believes individuals should be able to get licenses from the U.S. State Department to independently visit Cuba.

Currently, to visit and spend money in Cuba legally, Americans must usually go through licensed agents or charter services who are authorized to put together groups for humanitarian, cultural, or educational purposes.

Nunez says it can be expensive and time consuming to join some of those groups. Both he and DiMaio recently traveled to Cuba and they believe more from Tampa will follow.

"They're some of the most resourceful people on the planet," offered Nunez. "They've taken making lemons into lemonade to a whole, new level."

Nunez wasn't able to find cousins still living in Cuba, but plans to return to renew the search for his Cuban roots.
