

# Cuban national hopes to visit her homeland

Cindy Hval/SR

When Denia Correa came to the U.S. 20 years ago she knew she might never return. With the new open relations between the U.S. and Cuba, Correa is finally able to plan a trip home.

[\(Full-size photo\)](#)

On Saturday, Pope Francis arrived in Cuba, hailing the detente between the United States and Cuba as a model of reconciliation. But for Cuban national Denia Correa, who came to the United States as political refugee, the Pope's visit is just one more sign that after 19 years, she may soon get to see her family again.

"My childhood was very good. I grew up in the country, rode horses and learned to drive a tractor," Correa said. "But I always knew I wanted to leave Cuba."

Her father worked as an engineer for the government and Correa said the boarding school she attended was "the best of the best on the island."

But life in Cuba was far from idyllic for many.

"There was no freedom of religion. We couldn't travel freely and if you were homosexual or mentally disabled you were jailed," Correa said. "Deep down we knew there had to be something better. There had to be something outside of Cuba."

She attended university in Havana and earned a bachelor's degree in education and then earned a degree in linguistics.

While teaching English as a second language at the University of Havana she began to seriously think of leaving. "We'd heard the stories of freedom in the U.S.," she said.

The thought of parting with her family was wrenching, but the lure of religious, political and cultural freedom proved too great to resist. In 1996, she boarded a plane for Miami with her husband and her in-laws.

"The first time I ever saw my father cry was that day at the airport," Correa said. "I didn't know if I would ever see my family again."

At 25, she arrived in the United States as a political refugee sponsored by World Relief.

As the designated English-speaker, she felt confident at their first stop in Miami, but when they changed planes in St. Paul, the cacophony of sounds was overwhelming.

"Although I taught English in Cuba, my ear wasn't ready for American English. It sounded like a kennel of barking dogs."

In addition, she'd left Havana wearing a summer dress, but it was autumn in Spokane. Thankfully, their sponsors met them at the airport with coats.

Correa will never forget her first sight of Spokane. Her eyes filled with tears at the memory.

"I saw the lights of the city when we drove in from the airport and I said, 'Yes! Tomorrow morning I'm going to wake up here!' I was so happy just to be here."

After a week with a host family, Correa, her husband and in-laws were settled into apartments. She immediately plunged into her new life, signing up for nursing assistant classes in Spokane Valley.

The cold weather was a big shock, and navigating grocery store aisles was disorienting.

"The only things I recognized were orange juice and cabbage," she said. "The peppers here tasted like nothing from home, but cabbage still tasted the same."

Preparing meals was different, too. "I was raised on three warm meals a day and nothing prepared from cans or boxes."

Even now, she struggles with American slang. "I still don't get it," she said, laughing. "People were always saying, 'See ya!' In Spanish *silla* (pronounced see ya) means chair. I wondered, why are they always saying chair to me?"

Sadly, the changes proved too much for her husband and his family. They soon left Spokane and moved to Miami.

"I guess I just adjusted better," she said. "I came here to make it – to be independent."

She earned her nursing assistant license and worked at Lakeland Village. But the adjustment wasn't easy.

"It was lonely," she said. "So very lonely. That Christmas was hard."

Phone calls to her family in Cuba were difficult and the thought of visiting them, even if it were possible, was unthinkable.

"I couldn't bear to go back and see them and then have to leave them again," she said. "I couldn't bear it."

So she stayed and worked to build a new life for herself. She eventually remarried and had a son in 2007. "He's my miracle baby," Correa said. "He's being raised the same way I was – education is important and he's going to go to college."

She'd like him to meet his grandparents and to learn about his Cuban heritage. The thawing relationship between the two countries will soon make that possible.

“Cuba has a lot to offer – a rich history, beautiful architecture and the people are wonderful. They want to share their stories with you – they want to share whatever they have.”

Correa is planning to visit her family next year and hopes to move her parents to the U.S. When she found out the Southside Senior and Community Center was planning a trip to Cuba this spring, she said she realized she had something to offer.

“I’m going to be teaching Spanish classes there October through November,” she said. “I’ll offer a little bit of history.”

She hopes people will take advantage of the opportunity to visit Cuba. “It would be good to see it before McDonald’s takes over,” she said.

While the island will always hold a place in her heart, Correa said, “I’m very thankful to Spokane. It took awhile, but this is home now.”

For more on the Southside Senior and Community Center Cuba trip go to <http://sssac.org/index.html> or call (509) 535-0803.