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Cuban chef who reached country on July 4th feels 'blessed to be US citizen'



MARY ELLEN WRIGHT | Staff Writer Jun 30, 2019



Chef Fernando Garcia, catering chef for Willow Valley Communities, became an American citizen after fleeing his native Cuba.

DAN MARSCHKA | Staff Photographer

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The Fourth of July is special to Fernando Garcia, and not just because he's a relatively new American citizen.

He crossed the border from Mexico into America on July 4, 2007.

He may not be as new a citizen as some of the others profiled on these pages, but he certainly had serious challenges getting here.

Growing up in Cienfuegos, Cuba, Garcia always knew there was something better for him outside of his homeland.

He had gone to culinary school for four years and was working at a hotel.


"I didn't want to be part of communism," Garcia says. "I learned early on that it was not a good future for me there. So, I decided to take the leap of faith and try to escape." He first tried in his early 20s.

Every time he tried to join others fleeing his hometown by boat, something went wrong.



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Garcia, 33, who is the catering chef for Willow Valley Communities in Lancaster, was arrested a few times when the Cuban police showed up as he was getting on a bus to go to that boat.

"They took us straight to jail," he says. "It was unpleasant to be there. The food was horrible. There was no air conditioning, and Cuba can have 100-degree weather for weeks and weeks."

But he persisted, and finally escaped to Cancun, Mexico, with a boatful of people .

After paying a lot of money to be taken to the Mexico-U.S. border, he crossed a bridge over the Rio Grande.

At the time Garcia came to America, the law was that, "if the Coast Guard found you in the water, they'd deport you back to Cuba. But if you made it through, and you touched land, then you would be granted asylum," he says.

“At the border, you have the Mexican side and the U.S. side. The yellow line is in the middle of Rio Grande bridges,” he adds.

“Thankfully, I’m a U.S. citizen. I’m blessed to be a U.S. citizen.”

- Fernando Garcia

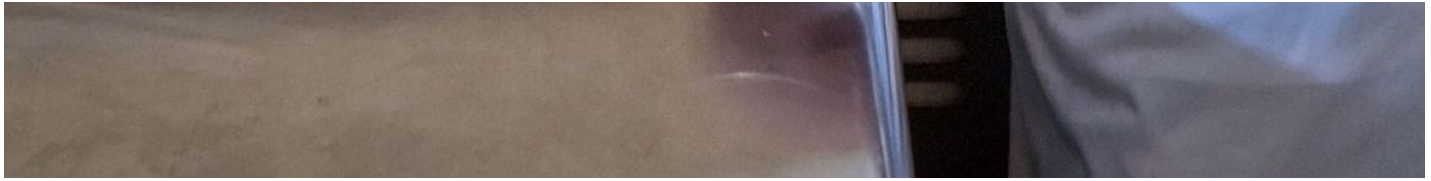
He crossed that yellow line and paid five or six Mexican pesos to go through a turnstyle.

“Once I was on the U.S. side, I gave myself to the authorities,” asking for asylum, Garcia says. “Then, all the paperwork starts. ... I had to go to court three times to prove I was Cuban and be granted permanent residency. Five years after that, you can apply to become a citizen.”

Garcia came to Lancaster to live with his aunt and her family.

He first worked at a produce stand at Lancaster Central Market, but he struggled with the English language.





Chef Fernando Garcia, catering chef for the Willow Valley Communities, prepares a Cuban dish, ropa vieja.

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A customer and his wife offered to take him to their home to help him learn the language.

Garcia remembers being skeptical.

In Cuba, he was taught that Americans weren't to be trusted.

"When he told me he wanted to show me something," Garcia recalls, "I almost fled his house."

But the customer showed him an album of black-and-white photos to explain that his ancestors had been helped by Americans when they came as immigrants from the Czech Republic.

To give back, Garcia is working to establish a program in which he will teach children in the Power Packs program to cook with the ingredients their families receive through the food-assistance program.

Language and civics

Garcia later took English classes through The Literacy Council of Lancaster-Lebanon, and studied by himself, using DVDs, for the 10-question civics test.

He was sworn in as a citizen in Philadelphia in 2013.

"That was the proudest day of my life," Garcia says. He has visited family in Cuba twice since coming here, and will go again in October.

He and his wife, Ashley, have a son, Logan, who is almost 19 months old.

Before getting his job at Willow Valley Communities, Garcia cooked at the Marriott hotel in Lancaster.

He also worked for celebrity chef Fabio Viviani in California.

Independence

For a chef, the Fourth of July is often a busy day, Garcia says.

“There is not a whole lot of time to spend with the family,” he says. “You’re serving other people.”

But he thinks back to that other Fourth of July, 12 years ago at the border.

“The border patrol told me, ‘Congratulations, welcome to the United States and happy Fourth of July.’ I had no clue what the Fourth of July was.”

When the patrol told him about Independence Day, “I said, ‘What a great day to look for freedom,’ ” Garcia adds.

Is his job at Willow Valley what he dreamed of back in Cuba?

“It is almost impossible to imagine this, like it is,” he says. “You didn’t have a picture of what the U.S. was.

“You had a picture of a negative,” he says. “But I knew there was something better than what they told me.

“Thankfully, I’m a U.S. citizen,” Garcia says. “I’m blessed to be a U.S. citizen.”

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This Independence Day, Guerra-Acosta intends to immerse herself in the law



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