

Writer of the Year Carlos Frías



The Journey of “My Family”

In his five-part series, “My Family,” Best of Cox Writer of the Year Carlos Frías chronicled his August 2006 visit to Cuba, the country his mother and father left after Fidel Castro came to power in 1959. Like most Cuban expatriates, his parents won’t return until the regime changes. In a sense, Frías took the trip back for them and reconnected with the people and places left behind.

By Loraine Fick [➤](#)

Carlos Frías stands in what was once the Restaurante Oriental, which belonged to his father and uncles. The restaurant is now a storage place for trash—its yellow and black granite floors are covered in caked red earth, piles of rotting fruit, vegetables and meat from the market inside.

“The truth is, there isn’t one story—there are many.”

Images from Carlos Frías' series.



“My father opened Mi Buchito Oriental, the first of the seven restaurants he and his four brothers owned, in 1952. He is pictured in the center, frozen in time as he is about to take a sip of coffee. Mi Buchito and their other restaurants in the Plaza were taken over and closed by the government in 1965 as my father and two of his brothers were in jail for attempting to flee the country.”

➤ “I had been getting ready to write this story my whole life,” says Carlos Frías, a special projects reporter in sports at *The Palm Beach Post*.

When he arrived in Cuba, he had less than two weeks to track down family members and record his experiences. He had so many people to meet, so many stops along the way. A graveyard so large he had to consult an index to track down his grandfather’s plot. The jail that once held his father. The site of one of the bustling cafés his father and uncles owned in the 1950s.

The challenge was daunting. “How do I take 12 days and tell a coherent story?” Frías wondered. “The truth is, there isn’t one story—there are many.”

Bill Greer, assistant managing editor for projects and weekends at the *Post*, who worked closely with him to edit the story, advised, “Dig into your feelings. Write about what stands out most to you.”

Frías, 32, fashioned “My Family” in two formats—a five-day series in print and a multimedia web presentation. The project serves as a bridge between two cultures and resonates with readers, regardless of heritage.



The author's father, Fernando Ariel Frías, in 1955.



"My mother, Iraida, receiving her graduation diploma in 1953 from Las Madres Escolapias. She is with her good friend, Estela, who was her graduation godmother and who remembers my mother's impeccable penmanship."



"Teresita was the prettiest waitress my father and his brothers say they hired. During my visit, she hands me a picture of my father from 1955, 'So your dad can see I haven't forgotten him after all these years.'"

The Back Story

When dictator Fidel Castro's health problems made headlines last year, reporters and photographers quickly tried to get into Cuba to cover the news. But in a country historically hostile to the press, journalists were turned away or, if they got in, had trouble gaining access to information and sources, and made little headway in getting the story.

Greer suggested sending Frías, since he was fluent in Spanish and had family connections in the country. He could go in as a tourist instead of a journalist, and write a personal dialog instead of a straightforward news piece. It meant having someone there who could tell a story, even if it was not a traditional breaking news story.



Local children now play baseball on the open grounds of La Cabaña.



More than 500 men were jailed in each of these cells, where bunk beds were stacked five beds high and in rows of 10. Now some have been turned into souvenir shops, cafés, even this chapel.

A First Stop

Once in the country, Frías went to La Cabaña, the prison where his father was jailed for nearly two years just for trying to leave Cuba. It has been converted into a tourist destination complete with gift shop and café—a place where visitors can buy an ice cream sandwich on a hot August day. A guided tour makes no mention of the prison’s history.

From the series:

Could this be where my father learned to play chess—a game he would teach me at age 6—with a young Chinese man, who was dragged off to the firing squad in the middle of one of their games?

Day to Day

Each day in Cuba underscored an essential truth for Frías. “Everything is harder there,” he says. There are showers, but not enough water pressure to use them; there are medical supplies, but not enough to go around; there are jobs, but in this Communist country, there is little distinction between pay for a carpenter and a physicist.

One day, Frías prepared to meet an old family friend. He bought chickens and soda to bring—the only groceries he could find for sale. It’s illegal for Cubans to be caught with red meat. It’s only available through the black market or when medically necessary:

My cousin, before he left, had a doctor friend of his write a prescription saying my aunt needed beef as part of her diet. Technically, it is a lie. In truth, I look at her and wonder how much thinner, how much more frail she might be without the protein.

Yet another lesson, shown to him again and again: Cubans’ *resuelven*—that is, they are skilled at making the most of what they have. They offer their homes, food and friendship freely. Frías was particularly touched by Isabel, his cousin’s granddaughter, who gave him two teddy bears from her meager collection of toys to take home to his daughters.

Staying Connected

“My Family” is a story of reconnection over time, distance and culture, between the harder life in Cuba and the easier one in America:

On my last day here, I am chatting online with my wife and my mother-in-law back in the United States. In a country where phone service is a privilege. In a building where the elevator doesn’t run.

And while the story is about Cuba, its appeal is universal. Greer remarks, “Readers see it’s really about love of family. It’s something people from every nationality can relate to.”

When Frías returned home, the internet allowed him to stay in touch with his Cuban family in ways his parents couldn’t when they made their journey to the United States four decades previously:

My wife and I put the girls to bed at 9 and chat online nearly every night since I returned. We share stories that make us laugh and cry simultaneously on opposite ends of the world.

A connection is made forever.



The Old Havana that tourists visit has been beautified, but just a block away from the restored streets is the real city, where sewage washes up along the roadside and laundry hangs from cracked concrete buildings.

Telling the Story

According to Best of Cox judges, the finest multimedia journalism takes advantage of video, audio, imagery, text and the web's inherent interactivity. *The Palm Beach Post* demonstrated that "My Family" was a natural fit for this mode, as Frías wrote and narrated a shortened script of the series in both English and Spanish posted on palmbeachpost.com and lapalmainteractiva.com.

"The drive is not just for good journalism—getting the story first, getting the quotes," says Frías. "The *Post* also values good writing and thinking creatively, and then gives reporters the space to do this. The *Post* wants great writing in every section of the paper every day."

The Rest of the Story

Frías' experiences in Cuba will be expanded in another medium soon. He has a contract to write a book, tentatively titled "Take Me with You," to be published next year by Atria Books, a division of Simon & Schuster. ●



"Children play soccer in the ruins of what was once my father's restaurant."

Carlos Frías

Born July 18, 1975, in Coral Gables, Fla.

Previous Cox job *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* special projects reporter in sports, Braves back-up beat writer, preps writer

Home life Married to Christine. Their third daughter is expected in August.



Photo: Alyssa Schukar/The Palm Beach Post

To access the series, visit palmbeachpost.com/news/content/news/special_reports/cuba or lapalmainteractivo.com/noticias/content/noticias/comunidad/articulos/2006/09/0929_carlosday2.html.