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“House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights, and Oversight.”

I left Cuba in 1989 and came to the USA seeking freedom and opportunities. I left behind my parents, two sisters, a nephew, cousins, aunts, uncles, neighbors and friends. Currently, I live in Miami Beach with my 8-year-old son, Liam, and I work as the Director of Therapeutic Activities for the Hebrew Home for the Aged in South Beach. I am a single mother.

A few months after I left Cuba, my middle sister, Zoila, died as the result of a car accident. At that time, her son Leonardo was two years old. My mother is now 78 years old and in bad health. If she dies, I will no longer be able to visit Leonardo. Why? Because the 2004 U.S. Travel Policy towards Cuba says that you can only visit your family in Cuba every three years. Further, the travel policy defines who can and cannot be a member of your immediate family. And, because nephews are not considered part of your immediate family, I could no longer visit Leonardo -my only nephew.

In 2004, Liam and I went to Cuba to bury my father who suffered from Alzheimer's. Since the travel restrictions had just come into effect in 2004, we had to wait until 2007 to go again. For three years, my elderly and sick Mom had to care for my disabled older sister without my support, or without the joy that my visit could have brought. For three years, my Mother and my son were not allowed the pleasure of being with each other, to play, to cuddle, to hear family stories, to share home-made desserts, or to enjoy that very special relationship between children and their grandparents.

My son Liam was born in the U.S. Liam is allowed to visit his Grandmother -his only grandparent- once every three years. While 3 years at our age seem to disappear before we know it, for children it is a lifetime. It is unimaginable. For Cubans, as well as for Americans or any other culture, maintaining family ties is very important. In 2007, after 3 years of separation from his Grandmother, the bond that Liam and my mother had in the earlier years was gone. When we arrived in Cuba, he did not know how to behave around her. She was a stranger. And now, although I maintain regular telephone contact with my Mom, Liam is reluctant to talk on the phone with her.

Liam has to wait for another three years, until August 2010, to see his grandmother. By then she will be 80 years of age and he will be 10 years old. His childhood will be almost over, and the memories that he should have of his grandmother will be missing. There will be a gap in his identity. It is like *déjà vu*, like Peter Pan in reverse.

I put emphasis on the damaging effects of separation between Liam and his grandmother because Liam is a child. As his mother, it is my duty to voice his rights. Let me quote from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 16 (3) “The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State”. Thus, the United States government is violating the fundamental rights of its citizens by failing to protect the family structure. This is why I’m here today, in the name of the many Liams, Thomases, Marias, Leonardos and all the Cuban children who are caught in the middle of politics that override their interests. I’m raising my voice in the name of their lost memories.

When my son asks me why he cannot see his grandmother, there is no logical explanation that satisfies him. When I think that my mother’s health could get worse and she would end up in the hospital, and I’m not allowed to travel to Cuba to be by her side due to the U.S. travel restrictions, it breaks my heart. Does it make sense that I cannot see my mother, if God forbid, her health worsens because of this policy? When families separate to come looking for a better future in this country, and to pave the road for others, they don’t envision a three-year wait imposed by –what we think- is the most compassionate government of all–the United States of America. Indeed, the children who are caught in the middle are not thinking they are not going to be allowed to see their loved ones in Cuba, their mother, father, or grandmother, but every three years. And they don’t know that they will not be able to go back if the only family left consists of nieces, nephews, aunts and uncles, or cousins. It is unbelievable that this would happen in America.

This issue is not about being a Democrat or Republican, or being in favor of or against the Cuban government. This issue is about protecting the family structure, and especially our children.

Hurricane Ike caused significant devastation throughout Cuba. When I spoke to my mother on the phone after the Hurricane, she was in despair. It

was still raining heavily and the roof of her house was leaking in many places. Haitians in the United States can travel freely to Haiti to help their family and friends. Americans who have family in Galveston can offer them housing, money, clothes, supplies and emotional support. Cubans in the United States want to enjoy the same rights. If I could, I would be in Guantanamo helping my 78-year-old mother fix her roof. What in the world is wrong with that?

Cubans in the United States are not the only ones who have suffered in exile. Those in Cuba have suffered family separation, a dictatorship, poverty, near-famine and lack of human rights. It is time to wake up to the cry of our immediate neighbors, to the pain and suffering of the Cuban people. It's time to let love spread its wings and assist the ones in need. It's time to put aside politics by lifting all travel restrictions to Cuba and let the Cuban family from both sides of the Straits come together as one.