

Interviewee: Dr. Matilde Castiel, M.D.
Interviewers: Marie Theroux, Kaitlyn Fagundes and Catherine Griffin
Date: March 23, 2011
Location: Worcester, MA
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Abstract: Dr. Matilde Castiel was born in Cuba on November 3, 1954. In this interview she discusses how as a young girl she participated in “Operation Peter Pan,” which brought her and her older brother, along with many other children, from Cuba to the United States. She then had to live with a foster family until her parents were able to immigrate to the United States. Dr. Castiel did her undergraduate studies at the University of California in San Francisco, and later earned a medical degree from that same institution. She now lives in Holden, MA with her husband Aaron Mendel, and their two sons. Currently, she teaches medicine at the University of Massachusetts Medical School and runs the Héctor Reyes House, a home for Latino men in Worcester who are recovering from alcohol and drug addiction. Dr. Castiel identifies herself as a Jewish and a Cuban woman. She wishes to return to Cuba in the future.

MT: We are working to gather the oral histories of women in Worcester so that we can better understand their experiences. The National Convention of Women’s Rights began in Worcester in 1850 and focused on the education, work, health, and political commitment of women. Today, we would like to know more about your work experiences and cultural heritage. Thank you for contributing to such an important project!

MC: Thank you very much!

KF: What’s your maiden name?

MC: Matilde Castiel

KF: When were you born?

MC: November 3. November...3, ‘54

KF: Fifty-four?

MC: Mmm. Fifty.

FK: Oh, fifty.

MC: Fifty-four. Thank you for making me seem younger (they all laugh).

CG: What ethnicity do you identify yourself with?

MC: I identify myself as being Latina and Jewish.

CG: Thanks. Where do you and your family come from?

MC: My family originally comes from Spain, and from Spain they went to Istanbul, Turkey, and from there they went to Cuba. My mother and father were born in Cuba and I was also born in Cuba.

KF: Did you grow up in Worcester?

MC: No, I was born...I was born in Cuba and I remained there until the age of seven... seven years. Six and a half to seven years and then, I came to the United States in a program called "Peter Pan"...the Pe...Operation Peter Pan. So no, I stayed in a foster home (she laughs)...

FK: Mmm.

MC: ...for a few months until my parents came to California. This all happened in California. First, I came from Cuba to Florida for a week... or it may have been two or three weeks, and then from there I went to California. I went to California... because they were going to send me to Boston but my mom wrote that I was allergic to the cold and to down [feathers]... and all the things we wear for the cold... and so we went to California. So, I grew up in California. I went to college in California, and to medical school in San Francisco. And then I came here.

KF: When did you arrive in Worcester?

MC: Mmm... 19...

KF: Like year and age.

MC: 1989.

KF: 1989.

MC: Right.

KF: And why did you move to Worcester?

MC: Because...[telephone rings].

KF: Why did you move to Worcester?

MC: I moved to Worcester because of my husband... when my husband wanted to move here. My husband and I met in St. Louis, Missouri... and we were doing our medical residency there... and he wanted to come to, to Massachusetts to try something new. And I was just his girlfriend then. So he decided to move, and when he asked me to marry him he was already here. So I had to move with him. So he told me that it would only be for two years and we now have been living here for 20 years.

KF: Yes. Do you think that immigrating to the United States was a beneficial experience for you?

MC: Yes, very much...because in Cuba... life was very difficult... and my parents came here without money... but were able to work... and... with that I went to school and my brother went to school and we have visited many parts of the United States and the world, that I had never thought we could have had the opportunity to do that.

CG: Where do you live now?

MC: I live in Holden. Since I came to Massachusetts, we lived in Holden... but all my work has been in Worcester.

CG: So, where have you lived throughout your life?

MC: I started in Cuba, then... in Florida for a few weeks. Then in California, and later in Missouri, and finally here.

KF: Are you married?

MC: Yes.

KF: And what is your married name?

MC: The same.

KF: The same?

MC: My hus... (sic). The last name of my husband is Mendel but I kept my surname.

KF: Yes. What is your husband's name?

MC: Aaron.

KF: Aaron.

MC: Yes. A-A-R-O-N Mendel.

KF: What is his origin?

MC: He is Jewish, from Russ (sic). Ru-ra-Russia.

MT: Russia.

MC: How do you say it?

MT: Russia.

MC: Russia.

KF: Russia.

CG: Do you have children?

MC: Yes.

CG: How many?

MC: Two.

CG: What are their names?

MC: Adam is the oldest one and Zachary is the youngest, because they go from A through Z. No more! [Everyone laughs.]

CG: How do your sons express their culture?

MC: Very well. They are very proud [she laughs] to be Latino and Jewish. They both are in college now because they are only eleven and a half months apart from one another. The oldest is studying political science and Latin American Studies, and the youngest says he is going to study medicine.

CG: Do they understand Spanish and Cuban expressions?

MC: My sons?

CG: Yes.

MC: Yes, they understand but they have a little more to learn and yes, they understand Cuban expressions.

KF: Do you have brothers?

MC: Yes, one brother.

KF: One?

MC: Older than I am by almost two years.

KF: What is his name?

MC: Jaime

KF: Jaime?

MC: Jaime

KF: Oh, Jaime. Thank you.

MC: J-A-I-M-E

KF: thank you.

MT: And where does he work?

MC: My brother lives in California and he works in Encino [an area of Los Angeles] and he is a CPA (Certified Public Accountant). C-P-A?

MT: And where do you work?

MC: Where do I work?

MT: Yes.

MC: I work for the University of Massachusetts Medical School and Hospital.

MT: What is your title and what are your responsibilities in that job?

MC: I am a doctor. So, I have an MD (Doctor of Medicine degree) and my responsibilities are... my work is in the community. So, I have clinics in "Worcester Housing" and I have clinics in Centro Las Américas, and most recently we started a program called "The Héctor Reyes House..." and it is a program of... for... a program for young men or Latinos... Latino men... with drug problems. It is a residential program.

MT: What kind of problems?

MC: Drugs.

MT: Drugs?

MC: Drugs.

MT: Drugs?

MC: Drugs.

KF: Which university did you attend for your undergraduate education?

MC: I studied medicine in San Francisco, at the University of California, San Francisco.

KF: I'm sorry, but where did you go for medical school?

MC: In San Francisco.

KF: In San Francisco.

MC: The University of California, San Francisco.

KF: University of California. So, was that for your undergraduate education and medicine?

MC: I... I went to medical school there and my residency I did in Saint... Saint Louis. Medical residency... was for four years and then you receive an M.D. And then you need to do a residency and... and I did most of it in Saint Louis.

MT: What was your first job in the medical field?

MC: It was in a hospital in St. Louis, St. Louis Regional Hospital, and I worked in the emergency room there. And I also was director of the E.M.S. [Emergency Medical Services] of St. Louis, and then I came here.

KF: [Coughed]

MT: Are there other family members who have worked in the medical field?

MC: No.

MT: What influenced your decision of becoming a doctor?

MC: Much of it was partly in order to help people who had no money or an education—to help them with their medical problems. And when I was in school... in high school, I really liked science classes, and when I was in high school I worked in a hospital where I saw a surgery—a surgery and a heart surgery and I liked it very much. And I decided to do that.

MT: What is the most rewarding aspect of your occupation?

MC: To help people that need help... and to be something positive in their lives.

CG: What has being a doctor meant to you?

MC: What has it meant?

CG: Yes, has meant.

MC: It has meant a lot because I have... have been able to help in the lives of many people. And not only with their health issues, but in many aspects of their lives.

CG: Do you work with patients who speak [only in] Spanish or English, or [in] both languages?

MC: Many of my patients speak Spanish because they feel more comfortable speaking the language and not go through a translator.

CG: Do you feel that you can help your patients more because you know two cultures and languages?

MC: Yes, that's very important.

MT: How would your work be different if you lived in your home country, Cuba, instead of the United States?

MC: I do not believe that it would be different... it would be the same.

MT: Why do your clients here do not have money?

MC: Many... many... all of my patients have no money. And I think that most of them speak Spanish... So, yes, I think that if I was in Cuba, they would be the same.

MT: Has the Worcester community helped you to embrace your Cuban and Hispanic heritage or has it been a struggle?

MC: I don't know if it has been a struggle, but I don't believe—I don't believe many people view Latino culture in a positive manner. I believe it is one of the few places that does not view Latino culture in a positive manner. I think there is a lot of racism here. So, I think this has been[for a Latino] it is more difficult to achieve what she/he wants to achieve, because of this problem.

CG: Do you want to return to Cuba in the future?

MC: I would like to return to Cuba. I went there about seven or eight years ago...and it is a very

poor country.... But I like the people a lot. It is very pretty.

KF: I have some questions about your family and your youth.

MC: Young! [She laughs].

KF: Yes [she laughs]. What types of jobs did your parents have?

MC: My dad had a sixth grade education and he always used to sell clothes and household items. And when he came to the United States... he came without any money. At... at the beginning, he took paint off furniture. He did this for a few months until he was able to buy his car. Then he went and bought clothes, sheets, and towels... all kinds of things. And then he... put all the items in his car, and went to where the Mexicans lived in California because he could speak Spanish. There are many Mexicans in California and he sold all the things he had. He did that all his life... selling everything from behind his car. I do the same today with medicine because I have all of my things in the back of my car and I go from place to place working like my father. My mom studied homemaking... for example cooking and...and all of the things they say that women do.

MT: [Laughs].

KF: Was it difficult to adjust to life here?

MC: Yes, because when I came I was only six and a half or seven years old and had to leave my parents in Cuba, and I came with a woman that I did not know. I didn't speak English and I went to school without knowing how to speak English. So, this was very difficult. After, when my parents came things became better for me. However, it was more difficult for them because they were now living in a new culture, a new language.

KF: Was school difficult for you because of the language barrier?

MC: Yes, and still to this day. When I do math and I add, I always do it in Spanish because I always—or when I read, I translate it into Spanish, even though it has been how many years? Almost fifty years since I have been here..., but I still... think in Spanish.

KF: I have one more question. How old were you when you moved to the United States... to Florida?

MC: How old was I... or what or...?

KF: Yes.

MC: How old was I. Six and a half...six ...six ...and a half.

KF: Oh!

CG: Something else?

KF: No.

Post-interview follow-up question:

CG: In our first interview you mentioned the Operation Peter Pan. Can you explain it? For example, can you talk more about other children in the Operation and how did you become aware of it?

MC: So the... the operation happened. I—I came in '62, but it started in '61. The expedition... when thousands of young people left Cuba and... it was something that was... that was done by the American government and the American church (sic) that helped to bring thousands of children here. For example, I left when I was six, my brother was eight years old and... we came here and... first they sent us for a while, two... two weeks in... in Miami, in Miami, and then we went to... to Los Angeles and we stayed there three months until my parents... came. And I didn't know English but I learned English in three months... I learned English... and... when my parents came, I still couldn't live with them because they didn't have a job and they didn't have money. So, they... he... the organization that brought me here was the Jewish Family Services—Jewish Family Services also helped my dad to... and my mom to find a job but, until they had a job and had an apartment I couldn't live with them. So, then we waited a few months until we were able to live... with my parents. So, it was something... my friends at that time... that I had then also... experienced the same things. One of them... his parents... the mother came five years later and the father died in Cuba and he didn't get to see... but... most of the... of the... many of them have done well for themselves... since they arrived here they have reunited with their families. They have... have done well. There are many, you know, that... that part when we were reunited with our parents has... has caused psychological problems in some of them... but most of the ones I know have done well after that happened. Is this OK... do you want more?

KF: It is OK. Thanks.