



The International School

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An excerpt from
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Learning from Cuba

Third grade Spanish teacher Norma Torres-Alonso knows what it means to be a “risk-taker”.

In 1998, Norma and her husband put their names in the U.S. government lottery for a visa to emigrate from Cuba. Norma was a teacher, her husband was an electrical engineer, and they had a four-year-old daughter. If Cuban officials learned of their visa application, they would never be allowed to work again.

The family lived with this big secret year after year, never knowing what might happen. In early 2006 an envelope arrived: her husband had been chosen in the lottery. There were no guarantees of immigration, but they were invited to begin the process.

Norma and her husband were immediately dismissed from their jobs. They had interviews, submitted paperwork, and waited. Their families supported them emotionally and financially as the process dragged on. There was a lot at stake - if they were denied visas they would have to stay in Cuba but could not get jobs. Ever.

In late 2007, U.S. visas finally came through. The Cuban government took their home and household goods - everything except one small suitcase each. Norma, her husband and their 13-year-old daughter landed in Miami with no friends, no relatives, no knowledge of English, and no idea where they would get their next meal or bed. They had been given only a phone number to call upon arrival.

Their call reached *Catholic Charities*: someone would come for them. So they sat in the airport - 6pm, 7pm, 8pm - scared out of their minds, worried about their daughter, not knowing what would happen to them. Finally, at 11pm, a man came and they got into his car, not knowing who he was or where they were headed.

They were brought to small hotel room for the night, then offered a

choice of settling in Minneapolis, Atlanta or Portland. Minneapolis was too cold, Atlanta was too big . . . The family arrived in Portland and was helped by two more charitable organizations - *Sponsors Organized to Assist Refugees* (*SOAR*) and *Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization* (*IRCO*). They were set up in a small apartment, given food stamps and \$800 a month to pay rent and all other expenses. Norma worked as a salesperson, waitress - whatever she needed to do.

When she was hired at TIS in 2010, it was a dream come true. “I appreciate the opportunity that TIS has given me,” she says with emotion in her voice. “All the cultures here fascinate me. It’s one of the things that has impacted me the most, that I have enjoyed the most about coming to the United States. Since Cuba is an island and has been so closed off, we had no idea about the phenomenon of world cultures and how they interact. That’s what I love most about this school - we are all human beings, yet we have all these different cultures. Wow.”

Norma is truly happy in her classroom. “From the time I was born, I knew that I would teach. I didn’t know what, but I knew that I would teach something. I studied math in a special high school, but language always called to me. In university I focused on speech and language education.

“At TIS I love being able to apply my background and to figure out what each child needs. I love working with my colleagues - we get the best ideas when we do lesson planning together. And the IB style is very similar to how I taught



in Cuba. We’re teaching the children how to think, how to use processes: observation, investigation, analysis, synthesis. When a child discovers something for himself, that knowledge stays with him forever.”

Norma feels that her experience has made her stronger and more focused, but also more sensitive to the world. “I teach my students about the difference in opportunities and resources between our two countries. I want them to understand that being born here is a privilege. Being in this school and learning a second language from a young age is a privilege. I want to help them make the most of it.”

Norma’s enthusiasm clearly touches her students. “I’m not sure what engaged my son most,” said Amy Lennon, a parent whose child was in Norma’s class last year. “Her kinetic way of teaching, her kindness, her clear and strong command of the subject, her genuine emotion about what she’s teaching...” And what did Amy’s son like most about Norma? “That she was so excited to see me *every single day*.”

Long time TIS Business Manager Rob Timmons was on the board of [IRCO](#), one of the charities that was critical for Norma’s family when they arrived in Portland. Neither Rob Timmons nor Norma Torres-Alonso knew of the other’s connection to IRCO until now.