

ESOL VOICES: Student Spotlight

Yamil Morales

Yamil is a former MCC ESOL student from Cuba. In this essay, Yamil interviewed Abimail Serrano, a Cuban Balsero. Balsero comes from the Spanish word "balsa" meaning "raft," and was the name given to Cubans who illegally immigrated to the US in self-constructed vessels to escape communism. Abimail was one of the lucky survivors. He currently lives in Miami and works at the Miami International Airport.



Balseros

Can you imagine what it takes to put your life in the hands of the unknown? Have you ever heard about people that decide to risk their lives in a 90-mile voyage from Cuba to Florida in a small, unsecure, homemade rustic boat? That is what Balseros do. Balseros are people who can't deal any more with the way they live, and even worse the lack of a better future. In the 1990s, there was a massive immigration of Cuban Balseros to the US. Unfortunately, for many of them, their dreams were engulfed by the ocean.

Since I was assigned in my ESOL class to do an interview, I soon realized that this could be a good opportunity to call a Cuban Balsero that I knew in Miami. El Negro is how friends call him. I remember that he told me some of his extremely dangerous experiences while we were drinking a couple bottles of beer in the backyard that we shared as neighbors. Now, I am living in Rochester, and we hadn't talked by phone for a while, but after

Tellin him what was going on, he laughed at me and said in Spanish, "No problem my bro... I knew, I knew that someday I'd be famous," and we laughed in unison.

After we talked about our present lives, family, struggles, and accomplishments, I started asking about his adventure. The first thing I asked him was how did he start with the idea to become a Balsero? He said it all began around 1992 when one of his childhood friends asked him if he wanted to be part of a group of six to build an illegal boat with the intent to reach "La Yuma" the US shore. He remembered that he said to his friend, "Are you crazy? We may die easily!" They didn't know too much about the ocean, and also they had heard about a lot of people who had lost their lives in such a voyage. He said that he was sorry, but he didn't want to die that way, and told to his friend that he shouldn't go either.

He remembered that his friend told him back, "I said the same as

you, and now I am in." His friend also told him to think about it, and soon, because they just had one spot left to complete the group.

He told me he later changed his mind and took the risk of this dangerous journey, saying it wasn't easy, but after the day that he had been told about the idea to build a boat and leave Cuba, he was not able to sleep well any more. He was thinking about the things he had, almost nothing at the age of 28. He also said that he, his mother, and siblings were struggling with everyday life. He and his mother were working while his younger siblings were in school, and of course, their monthly income was insufficient even to buy food. He was thinking about a lot of things, such as their old house that was almost falling over their heads, but the most overwhelming thought was that he couldn't see any possibility in the future to change his situation. That was the moment that he started thinking seriously about his friend's proposal. He began to

dream about how good it would be if he was able to give his mother and siblings a better life. He felt responsible for his family, and he got the feeling that he had to do something. "I didn't want to see my mother struggling anymore." He prayed, and he ran to join his friend on "La Barca," the chosen name for their rustic boat.

He explained the process of constructing the boat. He said it took about a year to set up everything. He continued, saying that it wasn't easy, that nothing was easy. They had to find the necessary material, 9 tanks of 55 gallons of liquid capacity, enough Styrofoam for filling the tanks, wood, rope, etc. They also needed six oars, and they had to include a mast. They planned to move through the ocean using their physical force and the wind. All of the materials were hid separately until the day before they chose to leave Cuba. Then they transported everything close to the coast where they put together all the parts. They measured that their boat was strong enough.

I was interested in what happened once in the water, and he said, "I lived the most scary and desperate moments of my life during that experience." He

added that just God knows well what they lived in those 90 interminable miles of sea.

Then, he stopped talking; he paused. I felt that he took a big breath, held the air inside him while recalling those unforgettable 11 traumatic days at sea. Then, he came back and said, "It was God, had to be God," and added that he couldn't find another explanation for their surviving. After so many days they didn't see any coast, and he thought that they might be lost. In fact, they were adrift, but not one of them said anything about it. No one wanted to recognize the reality.

He continued saying that it was as if the nature were against them. The sun's rays were trying to burn their bodies while the wind as his accomplice stopped blowing up their small sails, keeping them steady for a couple days. He remembered that he was laying down in the boat's corner, and he was letting his mind wander thinking about life, his mom, siblings, and friends all together in his mind as if he was saying goodbye. He almost gave up, but he said that his mother's words, "The last thing we lose is our hope," were coming into his mind. He paused again, and I asked

him "What else?" I was feeling myself more anxious to know the end than if I was watching a Steven Spielberg film.

"It was God," he said again, that put in their path a Cuban American Yacht. They helped them reach the Florida shore. They gave them water, but they had to leave them soon because they could not be seen involved in their arriving. Later, U.S authorities rescued them, giving them medical attention, and support. "What else can I tell you my friend?" He asked.

They were at the sea almost 11 days, and they were not able to carry enough water and food for so many days. "I don't recommend anybody become a Balsero." He added that it was the craziest thing that he did in his life.

The situation in Cuba turned worse in the 1990s when their main economic and political ally, the Soviet Union (USSR) fell apart. At that time what was called a "Special Period" began where Cubans faced a lack of natural and economic resources, giving birth to massive emigration and the Balseros, like my friend El Negro.

ESOL Voices a collection of stories written by ESOL students at Monroe Community College. This semester, we are highlighting Latino students from South and Central American countries and the Caribbean. Look for a new story in the Tribune each month. We hope you will find these stories interesting and inspiring.

Katie Leite & Pamela Fornieri, ESOL Program, November 2015
