

American STORIES

Cuban-born Berta Cabrera and American-born Pauline Wert come from utterly different backgrounds, but they're as close as sisters

BY PAULINE HYLTON FOR USA TODAY

“PAULINE, WE’VE GOT TO WALK TO KEEP OUR LEGS MOVING,” 81-year-old Berta Cabrera says with a heavy Cuban accent. “Let’s get your shoes on now.”

Pauline Wert agrees with her caregiver. “You’re right, Berta. Otherwise we might get puny.”

They both laugh and amble out of the asparagus-colored bedroom and through the house. Berta’s hand rests on Pauline’s stooped shoulders as the older woman pushes her well-worn walker out the door and onto the sidewalk of a quiet cul-de-sac in Clearwater, Fla.

“When we get back, I’ll fix you an omelet,” Berta says.

“You make the best omelets because you don’t put so much stuff in them,” Pauline replies.

Laughter follows the two gray-haired women as they make their evening trek up the street.



BERTA CABRERA, at right, and Pauline Wert, 91, wave to a deliveryman as they finish their daily walk outside Pauline’s home in Clearwater, Fla. Berta has been caregiver to Pauline for five years, but the relationship has turned into a deep friendship between the two women.

FROM CUBA TO THE U.S.

Berta Cabrera has led an ordinary, extraordinary life, not unlike that of many Hispanic Americans of her generation.

Raised in a middle-class family, Berta grew up in the village of Ciego de Avila, Cuba. She attended Havana University to be a pharmacist but quit after one year to

move home.

She married her childhood sweetheart, Miguel, and had two children. The new family decided to move to America—a land of promise. Miguel went ahead of his young family and secured a job as busboy at a Chicago restaurant. A few months later, he was promoted to waiter. Miguel decided it was time to move his

young family with him and chase the American Dream.

The Windy City was too cold, so Miguel settled his family in Miami. The tropical climate was better for Berta. She doesn’t like the cold. “He told me that he didn’t want to move to Chicago because he didn’t want to lose me so young.”

After their second daughter, Ana Ma-

ria, was born, Berta decided to find work to help with expenses. Miguel worked at a window factory, and Berta found a job at a paper bag factory. They both walked to work from their home. Later, Miguel was promoted to office manager.

A DAY WITH NO LIPSTICK

When Ana Maria was 4 years old,

she was diagnosed with a degenerative muscle disease. She died the winter of her fifth year.

“My mother never wore much make-up, but she always wore lipstick,” Berta’s oldest daughter, Miriam, says. “I remember the day that I went to my sister’s funeral. I was 7 years old. I remember thinking that we were going to church »

PHOTOS BY EDUARDO LINSMIER FOR USA TODAY





PAULINE WERT and Berta Cabrera share a laugh as they wait for a family dinner at Wert's home in Clearwater, Fla.

“They were born 10 years apart, one in a sod hut on the Colorado prairie and the other in the center of Cuba, surrounded by sugar mills. Pauline was born a citizen. Berta had to wait for her American citizenship.

and my mom didn't have any lipstick on.

“Later that day, the priest came over and I sat on his lap. He told me that I needed to take my sister's place in the family to be a comfort to my mom and dad. Looking back, I know he meant no harm. He was trying to let me know how I could help.

“I'll never forget what Mom said. She corrected him. ‘She doesn't have to do that. She just needs to be herself. We love her for who she is.’”

Berta and Miguel had two more boys, Armando and Paul. There were now six mouths to feed.

Soon after, Berta began working in the medical field. She attended school in the evenings and worked during the day. After three years, she became a certified physical therapist.

AGAIN, TRAGEDY

All through Berta's marriage, Miguel had heart problems. About 26 years ago,

Berta received a call that her husband of 35 years had died of a heart attack while getting his hair cut.

It was another no-lipstick day. Eight years after Miguel died, Berta retired from physical therapy, packed up her belongings, rented out her apartment, and moved to Philadelphia to be with her daughter Miriam and her family of four.

In 1997, Miriam and her family, along with Berta, moved to Clearwater, Fla. Miriam and her husband worked while Berta stayed home to help with cooking and laundry. Eventually, she started caregiving.

A FRIENDSHIP FORMS

She met Pauline after the women were introduced through their daughters, who are friends. At first, Berta came to the house several times a week to help Pauline with her breakfast, shower, and then a walk.

A few months after Berta started, Pauline's husband was placed in a nursing home. Each day, Berta traveled to Pauline's apartment and together they walked to see Ray.

One day Berta accompanied Pauline to see Ray for the last time. Ray was in a semi-coma.

Berta was there for Pauline. It was a long walk back.

SIMPLE JOYS

Sometimes Berta and Pauline work on Bible lessons together. Pauline sits in her lift chair while Berta pulls up a chair at Pauline's faux antique desk.

“What do you think the answer» is, Berta?”

“I think the questions are hard. Don't they know that we have trouble because we're old?” The two laugh as they continue.

They've been together for over five years. Normally they stick to their regular



THROUGH GOOD and bad, Berta has been there. In the process she has become part of Pauline's family.

routine, but on Wednesday mornings they go out. Berta picks up Pauline to get her hair done. After Pauline's hair appointment, they head to Walmart to pick up supplies for the week. Pauline sits on the seat of her walker while Berta scours the aisles for the needed items.

Berta never rushes Pauline. She's not in a hurry. They both know that rushing through life is not what it's all about. Life is fragile and meant to be enjoyed. Berta says, “All of your work that you have to do will be there tomorrow.”

Their last stop is a local fast-food place. They both get a chicken sandwich and a drink to take home. The grand total for two people—\$2.12.

Maybe that is how Berta and her husband managed to send four kids to college.

They arrive home happy. Berta puts away the supplies while Pauline watches from her lift chair. Then they sit down to their inexpensive meal. To them, it's a feast.



Source of light

Every Tuesday, Berta meets with several people in the church library. It is a ministry to prisoners called Source of Light. The volunteers send out Bible lessons to prisoners. The prisoners fill out the answers and send them back to be graded. Berta and another woman handle all the Spanish lessons. “Sometimes they write to us and say that we are the only contact they have with the outside world. Many of their families have given up on them.” Berta says. “We pray for them each week.”



Berta admits that learning English was her biggest challenge when she moved to America. “In high school we studied English each year, but the pronunciations are much different in Spanish.”

Her advice to new immigrants: “Learn English. The better you know the language, the better job you can get.”

Her greatest accomplishment? Raising her family, of course.

When asked what she admires about her mom, Miriam says, “I don't have to think about that. No matter what, whether good times or bad times, she's a constant. She's always thinking about her family—always serving. She's always someone you can count on to be there. That's what I love and appreciate about my mom.”

Proverbs 16:31 states: “Gray hair is a crown of glory; it is gained by living a godly life.” Berta Cabrera has earned her crown.

An interesting life. A lasting legacy. That's the real American success story. ❁