

GFWC Florida

Women with Wisdom

Series



**Elena Coates – GFWC Tampa Woman’s Club**

Nominated by Laura Connelly, GFWC North Pinellas Woman’s Club

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When you think of Peter Pan, what comes to mind? Let me tell you about our own Peter Pan, Elena Coates. Elena’s father was a successful doctor in Cuba when Fidel Castro came into power. At the age of seven, Elena became part of Operation Pedro Pan, a covert program that helped school-age children escape repression in Cuba. The program was designed to protect Cuban children like Elena whose parents were being targeted by Fidel Castro’s new regime. From 1960 to 1962, Cuban parents made the difficult decision to send their children to America unaccompanied. Over 14,000 children left family and friends and the life they knew to go off on their own to a strange country.

Elena’s parents watched as the Castro government took over private businesses and the education system, closing all Catholic schools and replacing education with propaganda. When nuns were sent to Spain, parents kept their children out of school. Elena’s parents knew they had to make a difficult choice.

Putting 7-year old Elena in charge of her 6-year old sister and 5-year old brother, her parents snuck them out of the house so their communist nanny wouldn’t report them. Elena and her siblings flew to Miami with other Peter Pan children in December 1961. Father Walsh was a priest in Miami who had obtained visas for the children to enter the United States, and who along with others, helped place the children when they arrived. Some went to live with family members; others waited in camps until they could live temporarily with other families until their parents arrived. The Cuban children ended up in a total of 39 states.

Elena and her two siblings went to live with an aunt’s family in Ft Lauderdale. Though they were related, they were strangers she didn’t know. She did not speak English which made things all the more difficult but she was determined to learn the language. Some Peter Pan children were not as fortunate, and had to stay in various orphanages and camps. Some were separated from their family for years.

Elena’s parents came to the U.S. eight months after she and her siblings arrived. Her father was immediately sent to jail for 30 days until cleared by the FBI. When her father was released, they went to live in Miami. She recalls the “No dogs, No Cubans allowed” signs when her family searched for housing. The U.S. government provided them with food and paid their rent for four months. After four months, they were expected to provide for themselves.

Although he was a successful doctor in Cuba, Elena’s dad had to start all over again after passing the Foreign Boards exam. Once he passed the exam, he took a job at a hospital in Nashville, later moving to Pottsville, PA and Queens, NY for internship and residency, respectively. After that, he set up his own pediatric practice in NY.

Life was not easy, but Elena’s parents expected their children to become independent and make something of themselves. Although Peter Pan children had a difficult time well into adulthood, most grew up to become doctors, lawyers and successful career people.

In 5th grade, Elena started volunteering. In high school and college, she volunteered in nursing homes, social service organizations, hospitals, and assisting Vietnam War veterans. Later she began to tutor inner city students. Grateful for all the advantages she has had and the many people who have helped her on life’s journey, Elena enjoys giving back and making a difference in the lives of others.

Elena loves being a part of GFWC and a member of GFWC Tampa Woman’s Club. She encourages us all to study GFWC’s fascinating history, empower women so they can be proud to be clubwomen, and dream big. Her vision includes clubs partnering with like-minded organizations to increase our visibility and make a bigger impact in our communities.

Thank you for sharing your incredible story, Elena. We are so glad you brought your love of volunteering to GFWC!