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At 13, She Emigrated From Cuba. Today, at 31, She Leads a Cultural Center Celebrating Cuban Culture.

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Part of María Carla Chicuéen's efforts as executive director of CasaCuba is to help people understand that philanthropy isn't just "an elitist activity." The group is nonpartisan and wants to hear all sides of an issue, says Agustín R. Arellano Sr., left, chairman of CasaCuba's board.

María Carla Chicuéen remembers how quiet she became at age 13, after her family emigrated to the United States from Cuba. So much of what she wanted to say was lost in the chasm between the Spanish she'd grown up speaking and the limited classroom English she knew.

Today, Chicuéen, 31, is far from silent. As executive director of [CasaCuba](#), at Florida International University, she gives powerful voice to the new research and cultural center in Miami.

"Once you talk to her, it's a little bit like the Pied Piper," says Ray Rodríguez, vice chair of the Advisory Board at CasaCuba. "People just follow."

Ground has yet to be broken on CasaCuba's 50,000-square-foot space for events and classrooms on FIU's campus. But Chicuéen envisions it as a home for research on Cuban policy, celebration of Cuban history and culture, and debate on the island's future. Her goal: that the center will become a hub for Miami's vibrant Cuban-American community.

As an academic institution, CasaCuba is nonpartisan. That sets it apart from other Cuban-affairs organizations, which tend to have a political agenda, says Agustín R. Arellano Sr., chairman of CasaCuba's board. "If there's a meeting to be had, we can put two sides together and let them work it out," he explains. "We want to be an enabler in getting relations improved between Cuba and the United States."

Since becoming executive director last year, Chicuéen has led the drafting of a strategic plan and secured nearly \$4 million from foundations, government grants, and major donors. She's focused on attracting financial support from the Cuban-American community.

Cuban-Americans have long sent remittances back to their families on the island, but philanthropic institutions have yet to tap into the community's generosity. Chicuéen wants to change that.

"This is a space where inspiration matters as much as information," she says. Highlighting the work of Cuban-American philanthropists and demonstrating their impact on the community, she says, is just as important as explaining how to donate to a cause. "I see it as an extraordinary opportunity to show the value of giving."

Building Excitement

A significant part of Chicuéen's outreach involves "helping the community understand that philanthropy is not an elitist activity, and that this is a project that is essential for future generations of Cuban-Americans."

To that end, CasaCuba has already organized community activities, including a book club for contemporary Cuban literature, that are similar to those planned for the center's building. "That's part of creating a CasaCuba and a

community before we have the actual CasaCuba," Chicuéen says, "so you really experience what it is that we will be providing that will be unique."

The book club meets monthly at the store Books & Books, in Miami; the poet Richard Blanco, the author Anna Menendez, and other writers have spoken to the club. Chicuéen aims to make the meetings accessible to a broad audience. "It's not intimidating," she says. "Every session is moderated by a reader with no expertise in the genre, in literature in general."

Chicuéen takes the same inclusive, experience-based approach to development. The first dinner in a series of fundraising events for CasaCuba celebrated Afro-Cuban culture. Guests listened to Afro-Cuban music, perused art and artifacts from the university's archives, and watched performances by an Afro-Cuban dance company. They even joined a conga line.

Tickets to the dinners are available for purchase by the general public, but Chicuéen's team also invites Florida International alumni and board members, members of the business and arts communities, and prominent Cuban-Americans. Raising awareness and excitement about CasaCuba at these dinners, she believes, is just as important as raising money.

Fundraising is still relatively new for Chicuéen. She dabbled in it when she worked on special projects in the office of the president of Miami Dade College, organizing events like Maker Faire Miami, an art-and-science exposition. "But the scale was very different," Chicuéen says. "CasaCuba is a major fundraising project, and it's especially historic for the Cuban-American community."

Rodríguez, the Advisory Board's vice chair, says Chicuéen more than makes up for her lack of experience with her enthusiasm for CasaCuba and Cuban culture. "Maria Carla is one in a million," he says. "She is an intellect with tireless energy and passion for this particular art."

Her passion has inspired grant makers, too. Last December the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation announced a \$2-million gift to CasaCuba, after providing \$200,000 of initial funding to launch the center in 2017. In April the National Endowment for the Humanities awarded CasaCuba a \$750,000 matching grant.

A Rough Transition

As a teenage immigrant, Chicuéen struggled to find her footing in Florida.

"It was probably the most challenging period of my life because I have a very close-knit family, and it stayed behind in Cuba," she says. "When we left, we didn't know when we would be able to see them again. We were starting from scratch. We had limited resources."

At her middle school in Havana, she was president of the student government; in eighth grade in Palm Beach County, Fla., she ate lunch alone in the cafeteria. She doesn't remember meeting any other Cuban students during her first year in Florida.

Support from teachers — such as one who suggested that Chicuéen lead lunchtime math tutoring sessions as a way to meet fellow students — helped her feel more at home.

But the most positive change came when her family moved to Miami just before she finished ninth grade, giving her more access to the Cuban culture she missed so much. "It made a world of difference," she says. "We were close to family members in Miami. I was surrounded by a lot of Cuban and Hispanic students at school."

Seeing how she'd flourished as a part of the school community, administrators chose Chicuéen to mentor new students who enrolled in her high school after immigrating from Cuba. "Everybody knew that it had been really hard for me to make the adjustment, and then I had really come to love the school and became very involved," she says.

After high school, Chicuéen left Miami for 10 years, earning a bachelor's degree from Harvard University and a master's degree from the London School of Economics and Political Science, and working on education and trade issues in Latin America for the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank.

But what she really wanted, she says, was to return to her adopted hometown and give back.

The opportunity came with the executive director's position at CasaCuba. "It seemed like a dream," she says.

Bridging Divides

Chicuen's passion for the project has been unflagging. "You kind of get caught up in her way of talking about it. You feel that she really believes in what she's doing," says Arellano, the board chairman. He and his family have given \$1 million to the project.

One reason Chicué'n's enthusiasm for CasaCuba is so palpable is that she feels so acutely the breach with the island. "I travel back and forth and have a lot of family still in Cuba," she says, "so I can very much identify with Cubans who were left behind and with Cubans who are cut off from the island."

The divide between Cuban-Americans and those who remain on the island has grown wider as Cuban expatriates age, Chicué'n says. Many young Cuban-Americans do not speak Spanish and have no relatives still living on the island.

"We are really risking a disconnect from our roots, from our culture, and that would be a tragedy for the future of the island," she says.

The diaspora has prevented young Cuban-Americans from knowing the homeland of their parents or grandparents. Arellano says the younger generations of his own family know little about their grandparents' experience growing up in Cuba, moving to the United States, and adjusting to a new life as immigrants. "I have 11 grandkids, and they don't really know much about that," he says. "We just don't want our heritage to be forgotten,"

Chicué'n sees CasaCuba, with its commitment to preserving Cuban heritage and generating debate on the island's future, as an antidote to this fear of being forgotten. As Cuban exiles age, she feels the need for cultural preservation.

Chicué'n says her relative youth helps potential donors — especially those who are older Cuban-Americans — understand the importance of creating a repository for Cuban heritage.

"It's almost like proof that their legacy is living on," she says. "When we, as a younger generation, are leading the charge, it's a tribute to Cuban culture and history, and a pillar for Cuba's future."