Exile Experience: Journey to Freedom

Posted on March 31, 2015 by caitlinmccaffrey11

For most Americans the images of the Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island, and Angel Island have become iconic depictions of brave immigration stories. These images tell a tale of people dreaming of starting over in a better place than they left, but in reality often finding an incredible struggle for acceptance, and at times facing rejection. If asked, most Americans would recall classroom lessons about Ellis and Angel Island; many may even have been lucky enough to have visited these historically and culturally significant destinations. How many people, however, have heard of or visited Freedom Tower? Now people will have exactly that opportunity. Visitors can explore and learn of Freedom Tower’s importance to immigrant Cubans in the collaborative exhibition The Exile Experience: Journey to Freedom.

The Freedom Tower, located in Miami, Florida, has had a long and interesting history. The tower’s original function was to house The Miami Daily News-Metropolis in the 1920s. It turned out to be a less than ideal location due to hurricanes and a lack of air conditioning, and the paper relocated in 1957. This move left the Freedom Tower abandoned for several years. Then in 1958-59 the Cuban Revolution erupted in Cuba and culminated with Fidel Castro assuming his role as dictator of the island nation. At that time, refugees raced out of Cuba and began to arrive on the coast of Miami. The Tower became a place of shelter for the immigrants in need. The US government eventually realized that the Freedom Tower needed to be fully equipped and staffed to deal with all of the fleeing refugees. Freedom Tower’s Ellis Island-like status was fully established in 1962. The government set up assistance for the immigrants in the form of medical and dental services, food and logistical help, and even airline tickets to anywhere in the country. Freedom Tower remained in operation in this capacity until 1974.

Last year Miami Dade College’s Museum of Art and Design (MOAD) partnered with The Miami Herald Media Company to reopen The Freedom Tower, or El Refugio as the Cuban Immigrants called it, as a place to celebrate Cuban-Americans, their journeys, and how they have excelled in America. The Exile Experience: Journey to Freedom is one of two exhibits, which opened in the fall of 2014. This particular exhibit will remain open for the next two years. The exhibit is comprised of objects, text, and journalistic pictures provided by the Miami Herald Media Company. The north side of the exhibit is dedicated to Pedro Pan, which tells the story of the intense and terrifying airlift rescue of more than 14,000 Cuban children between 1960 and 1962, whose parents sent them to America in order to avoid the indoctrination of Castro’s ideals in schools. It was the “largest recorded exodus in the Western Hemisphere.” More than half of these children never reunited with family. They were moved to 30 different states and the Catholic Welfare Bureau took care of those who were not able to find homes with American families. The south side of the exhibit features the history of Freedom Tower itself and elaborates on the experiences of thousands of Cuban immigrants who sought solace and relief from the facility and staff of the Freedom Tower. “We wanted this mix between having a historical perspective, but also telling this humanistic side,” comments Jeremy Mikolajczak, MOAD’s Executive Director and Chief Curator. “…That’s something the media, the newspapers of the time did a fantastic job in portraying.”

The Freedom Tower held its grand opening in the fall of 2014, and welcomed all Cuban immigrants and their families to come and celebrate. Eduardo Padron, President of Miami Dade College, emigrated from Cuba at the age of 15. He noted during the grand opening, “I remember thinking it was the most beautiful building I had ever seen. I understood it wasn’t really the Statue of Liberty, but I knew that it would be mine.”
Curators and designers of the exhibit wanted actual objects and stories from the refugees who came through Freedom Tower’s doors between 1959 and 1974. Louisa Yanez, who is an editorial writer for the Miami Herald and co-creator of the exhibit, stated that “we’ve collected memorabilia from that time…for people to bring their refugee cards, the clothes they wore, [the] doll a little girl carried. It was a very emotional event for these people.”

The Freedom Tower and MOAD will also house a rotating exhibit space to showcase various art forms in which Cuban-Americans have excelled and are currently excelling. The exhibit presently is *Cuba out of Cuba: Through the Lens of Alexis Rodriguez-Duarte in Collaboration with Tico Torres* and focuses on Cuban-American works of photography and art.

The Miami Dade College Museum of Art and design and the Miami Herald Media Company have worked to revive the Freedom Tower and create a truly wonderful place. Now Cuban immigrants and their families have the opportunity to come back to the place where they first experienced America. The MOAD will continue to work on creating meaningful and compelling exhibits to portray the overwhelming bravery it took to come to America and the incredible successes of the many Cuban-Americans throughout that history and into the present. The museum is free and open to the public and there are plans to turn Freedom tower into the Cuban American Historical Museum in the future.


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