

# Finding strength in tough times



Picture a young couple about to board the only ship that can take them and their newborn son to a life of freedom. Not knowing what else would be waiting for them on the other side, it was a journey that required a great deal of faith and courage.

They have just said goodbye to everything they loved and the only home they'd ever known. But as painful as that was, they knew it was necessary.

Their wedding rings would soon become a tangible reminder of that pivotal moment, as they were stripped of everything else they tried to carry on board. The idea to sow those wedding rings into the lining of her bra the night before was both clever and risky, and it worked.

More than 50 years later, I proudly share this inspiring story. Those people are my parents, who immigrated to the United States from Cuba in 1963. This move was made possible as part of a trade deal due to my uncle, who was a freedom fighter in the Bay of Pigs invasion (a failed military invasion of Cuba undertaken by the Central Intelligence Agency in 1961).

Fidel Castro's militia captured approximately 1,200 of the 1,500 invaders—among them was my uncle. As a prisoner of war, he and certain family members were later released to the United States in exchange for



medicine and food supplies.

On a more lighthearted note, my father vividly recalls seeing a lively display of fireworks as their ship arrived in South Florida. “Wow!” he thought to himself. It took him greatly by surprise, and he thought perhaps it was in honor of their arrival. Little did he know at that time, but it was all part of a pre-Independence Day celebration. That was actually the night of July 3, 1963. He had never heard of Independence Day before, but it’s something that our entire family would have the privilege of celebrating for many years to come.

Their story has shaped my entire attitude about life from a very early age. It taught me that dreams are waiting for us on the other side of fear, and we must step into courage to follow them. It is also the root of my faith, gratitude and confidence in knowing that we are never alone in our struggles. There’s no reason to hide or



pretend we don’t have them. Lean into friends and family when you need support because they love and want to help you.

One day you will do the same for them. And as one friend so eloquently explained, “To a person living under the cloud of suffering, the feelings of isolation carry more weight than the need to reach out.” So if you believe someone is having trouble, check on them. They might not know how to ask for help. But by personally reaching out, you can be that bridge.

Over the years I’ve experienced life-threatening illness, many surgeries, miscarriages, and other personal hardships. I’ve also lived through an intense volume of doctor appointments and countless sleepless nights worrying about my children, who have suffered from febrile seizures, anaphylactic food allergies, sensory processing disorder, and other challenges.

In every case, the support I received from my community provided me with the hope and strength I needed to power through the most difficult moments of my life. Without a doubt, I also learned that time is the greatest healer of all. Even when adversity knocks us down, we will rise stronger and smarter.

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