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I live proud to be a woman and to be Cuban

written by Magaly Cabrales
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Adriana Pérez Oconor Photo: Bill Hackwell

Adriana Pérez Oconor has been a chemical engineer since 1995. She currently works at the Food Industry Research Institute and holds a master's degree in that specialty. But it is not precisely her professional performance, nor her outstanding work as a member of the National Assembly of People's Power, in the period between 2013 and 2018, that is the main purpose of this interview.

This woman, with whom we spoke just a few days before International Women's Day on March 8, went from despair to the absolute happiness she lives today, in the company of her three children – Gema, Ámbar, and Gerardito – and her husband Gerardo Hernández Nordelo. This happiness, however, was preceded by an anguished road, which she only managed to travel by clinging to the courage inherited from Mariana, Celia, Haydée, and Vilma, among many other courageous Cuban women.

What was your reaction when you learned of Gerardo's real mission in the United States?

When Gerardo left Cuba for the United States, we were already married, and when he was arrested in 1998, we had been married for ten years. I was finishing the last year of my degree through a course for workers, as I was working at the Tenería Habana company at the time.

The knowledge of Gerardo's real mission was a real shock for me, a big surprise. As far as I knew he was in a Latin American country doing a master's degree linked to his diplomatic career and I never knew about his mission until the whole network was discovered and its members arrested. When he was arrested, he had been in the United States for about four years. When I heard of his arrest, I learned of something that I never even suspected, nor did I imagine that he could be linked to this type of activity, being arrested for espionage, as was initially mentioned in the news reports broadcast by radio stations in Florida and that was the only public information that was given at the time. It was actually a mixture of emotions

because first I had to assimilate the news. And second, how I would face a future that was totally uncertain and not at all promising.

On the other hand, there was the family situation. Gerardo's mother was alive and completely unaware of the activities of her youngest and only son. In that same year, she had lost a daughter, and for her, this news would be too much of a blow, much harder still. In other words, the news not only had a personal impact but also had an impact from a family point of view. This meant that I had to prepare myself psychologically for the role I would have to play from that moment on. Information that to make matters worse, had to be kept secret and assumed in silence, which demanded all my efforts, all my creativity, and all the sentimental resources I could summon.

From that moment on I was obliged to impose myself on a world that I knew from the beginning was very difficult to cope with. I have often been asked how I managed to do it and I have never been able to give an answer because I still don't know how I did it. But I think that as time goes by, you gather strength, willpower, resources, and energy to face the new challenges that life imposes on you. And to face those challenges with emotional balance, I began to create a kind of armor that would allow me to live in tune with what was happening and at the same time take on what was coming. I was always convinced that it would be a very complicated road to walk, especially if we take into account how relations between Cuba and the United States have historically been.

At no time, however, did I stop working and, on the contrary, I looked for things to occupy my mind, to keep me from thinking. I finished my master's degree and began to study language, studies in which, although I never prospered, kept me mentally busy. At that stage, the most difficult thing for me as a person, as a human being, was the role I had to assume with respect to Gerardo's family. He always had a very close relationship with his mother. He had inherited her nobility, her sense of

humor. It was a great responsibility for me to try to cover for his absence. And I had to lie, lie a lot, something that is an element that had never been part of my personality before, that I had never even conceived of in my behavior before. I lied to everybody, I had to evade comments, I had to remain silent all the time and it was terrible. In fact, I was never able to do it and, albeit half-heartedly, I was revealing some parts of the truth that I kept hidden from people close to me, like my mother, who from the beginning of our relationship felt great affection for Gerardo.

Of course, all our dreams, illusions, plans, were shattered, shattered. I was left with only two options: either I let the knowledge of Gerardo's activities crush me, or I could start from the new conditions. Either I threw myself to die, renouncing everything I had lived, everything I had, everything that had made me happy and that I admired, or I began to walk this new path, dragging the sack in which I had thrown everything that had been broken, except love, which was the only thing that remained intact. I decided on the second option and began to adapt my plans to coincide with the great challenges that the new circumstances brought with them.

And from that decision, I set myself goals. The most important thing was to reach the end, even though I never knew when it would be. But I set out to reach that end with the necessary emotional balance to keep me strong and at the same time, to take care of all the fronts I had open, which were to attend to my work responsibilities and to give emotional support to the two families, especially Gerardo's. I also tried to remain socially active and to maintain good physical and mental health.

During the relentless struggle for the release of the Five, did you ever feel alone?

I always had the extraordinary support of all these people. I also had the valuable support of my family, of the families of the Five, who became one. I had the same support from my friends - who are many and very valuable - and from my work colleagues, who, when Gerardo's situation became public, helped me even more. It

was my colleagues who took up my absences when I participated in the solidarity campaigns in favor of the Five, in the meetings held inside and outside Cuba. They worked hard to keep the work going, taking care of my image as head of the production department. We became a great team.

Of great importance was also the support I received from Dr. Jesús Llanes Querejeta, who was my boss at the time. Professionally I learned a lot from him, as well as from his intelligence, discipline and optimism.

I cannot hide the fact that I had several moments of weakness. In that first stage of silence, which in my opinion was the most difficult, I experienced very hard, sad and painful moments. This is not to say that when our government released the information publicly and officially, my mood was better, but the situation became a little more bearable. There were days, for example, when I didn't know how I was going to get up and if I did get up I didn't know how to walk. In public, I always showed great strength, but when I got home and closed the door, that strength left me, and again I saw before me the sky joined to the earth. All the armour I had forged, which I kept outside, disappeared. At those moments, loneliness, nostalgia, uncertainty and longing took hold of me. However, I quickly thought: if out there, in the streets of Cuba and not a few countries in the world, there are thousands of people who are not related to the Five, who probably don't even know them and are demanding their freedom, how can I, as the wife of one of them, be weak.

That thought forced me to get up, to get going again. And so day after day I searched for resources to cling to when I was alone. Publicly I could not, it was not fair for me to show the slightest sign of weakness, when there was, I repeat, an entire people who, moved by their patriotism, humanism, solidarity, demanded the right of their children to be in their homeland. In reality, I lived through very, very difficult, very sad times, even in some international events, which became repetitive and I almost never saw a light that could be taken as a sign of progress. Many

people participating in those events did not understand that we were not telling a story, but that we were living that story, that we were part of it.

How did you deal with the two life sentences unjustly and arbitrarily imposed on Gerardo?

I knew Gerardo's sentence immediately because kind people present at the trial informed me of it. I think it was a problem of temperament, of character, or that it was already difficult for me to be surprised by something, that could make me collapse, but the truth is that the judge's verdict did not alarm me. The trial took place in 2001 and the conviction was announced at the end of that year. I already knew, from the guilty verdict on all charges that had initially been handed down, that the sentence would be far from lenient and I prepared myself for life imprisonment, but never for the death penalty. And as I always kept that sentence in mind, I began to analyze what could happen next. Without writing it down, I made a kind of mental timeline, or goal, where I had programmed: I have the strength to get to the sentence, and after that I have to create new handles for myself again. I also had six months between the trial and the final sentence which allowed me to draw up a strategy and the steps I had to follow.

During that time, a few things also happened: between June and December we prepared a video that we respectfully sent to the judge. In that recording we referred, from a humanitarian point of view, to who they were, highlighting their values. During that period, the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers also took place. And a letter to the Americans had also been made public, acknowledging that the Five had never harmed the people of the United States. There were two possibilities: one that they tried to prevent acts like the one that happened in the Twin Towers, or two, that people like them could prepare actions of this kind. In the end, we think that the judge leaned towards the second possibility because of the very strict, harsh and arbitrary verdict she issued. The judge's behavior allowed me to prepare myself

for the tougher, more complex scenario. For me it meant one life sentence or two life sentences because we always agreed that until the last one came out, we would continue our battles, our campaigns.

The conviction did not come as a surprise to me, it was not as shocking as the first news I had received when Gerardo was arrested. In fact, I did not cry that day. I had already prepared myself emotionally to bear it. I was fully aware that both Gerardo and his comrades were innocent of the charges against them; but the sentences were not for them, they were simply aimed at punishing the people of Cuba. It was demonstrated that in every conviction, particularly Gerardo's, there was a political rather than a legal component.

Sustained by the resolve that I had to go all the way, I adapted my approach to the new reality I was facing. The situation was much more complex and to live up to it our struggle had to be political and public. That would be the way forward. I remember that one day I said to my mother-in-law: it doesn't matter if I'm 80 years old, I'm going to wait for him, I'm going to receive him mentally healthy. And that's what I did after the sentence. There was no way and no matter what happened I could weaken, and I started to be stricter with myself, I had to make demands on myself to correspond with the new reality that arose after the trial and I think that was what hurt me the most. My life strategy was to prepare for the future day by day, even though I had no idea when it was going to come. But I still did what I could every day. Gerardo always taught me that: live each day as if it were your last. And that's what I did, even though I felt that all the sentimental burden I was carrying was hardening me. I got so hard that I reached the last stage of the campaign terribly exhausted from a sentimental point of view. Despite this exhaustion, I found the strength to welcome Gerardo, Ramón and Tony when they finally arrived in their homeland on December 17, 2014.

Despite the fact that Gerardo's case was the most difficult and tangled to resolve

judicially, you decided to become a mother. Why?

The truth is that I had no plans to have a child. Within the life strategy that I had drawn up for myself from 2001 onwards, with the arrest of Gerardo and his companions, and subsequently his two life sentences, with no possibility of visits in our case, of meetings, of the reinforced intention of the U.S. government to keep us separated, I totally dismissed the idea of being a mother, because in addition to all this, there was my biological clock that had to be taken into account.

Gerardo was the one who supported this dream of parenthood the most. So out of respect, because I thought he really deserved it, I changed my mind. Although in reality, it was more of a mutual agreement. He thought that for me as a woman it would be very sad not to become a mother and he felt responsible for it. Whereas I was thinking about the happiness it would bring him, in the midst of his confinement, to have a child.

Also, many people who were part of the campaign urged us to have a child, we were a young couple and therefore we had that right. Several people were sensitized to the idea, in Cuba and abroad. Among those who supported us the most were Vilma and Raúl, creators of a beautiful family. Also Olguita, René's wife, a very sensitive person and mother. In the meantime, my biological clock was ticking.

It was in those days that Gerardo wrote his letter "To the children yet to be born". That made me so sensitive that I decided to undergo the process of vitro insemination, which was not even widely performed in Cuba. My eggs were saved so that one day they could be inseminated. In a conversation with U.S. Senator Patrick Leahy, who was visiting Havana with his wife, I mentioned to him that Gerardo and I had been deprived of so many rights that we could not even have a child, which is the greatest aspiration of a married couple. He, however, was the father of four children, as well as having grandchildren and even great-grandchildren. Apparently, my words touched him deeply and he became one of the most supportive foreigners.

When I was told later that everything was ready to begin the process of assisted reproduction, I thought it was a trick, another mockery of the U.S. government. But no, there she is, our first daughter, our Gema.

From what you have lived, from your own experiences, what do you think of Cuban women?

In that sense, the first thing I need to say is that I feel tremendously proud to be a woman and a Cuban. Very, very proud. In our campaigns for the Cuban Five, both in Cuba and abroad, we have always had the immense support of precisely the women's umbrella organization. The Federation of Cuban Women, through its eternal president Vilma Espín, opened the doors so that we could proclaim our truth on any stage, even the most complex. In those events and meetings, through our voices, Cuban women spoke.

I believe that women are the backbone of the family and we have achieved this through our lineage. We are strong-willed, unbreakable, courageous and determined to face and overcome any obstacle in order to reach the proposed goal. It is precisely because of the perseverance that characterizes Cuban women that I have managed to reach this point with all my dreams turned into a beautiful reality.

When I speak of Cuban women, the example that comes to mind is that of the world record holder athlete Ana Fidelia Quirot, who was able to overcome her accident and return to competition. In the same way, I think of those women scientists, in general of all those women in the health sector, who remain in the danger zones in the confrontation with COVID. They constantly risk their lives to save the lives of others. A very important role is also played by housewives, who, like all women, with their daily work, with a simple smile, with that healthy and spontaneous vanity, beautify everything around us.

The first Latin American woman to be awarded the Paloma de Plata trophy by the

Russian Federation, Adriana Pérez is also the recipient, like the other wives of the Five Heroes of the Republic of Cuba, of the 23 de Agosto Medal and the Order Ana Betancourt. Today, she says with emotion, she is immensely happy because “I have Gerardo and my children by my side. But I would never have been able to reach this moment, which I could not even have dreamed of years ago, if I had not had the support, the great and selfless support of hundreds of thousands of people, who came from the most remote corners of Cuba and the world, fought, as much as we did, for the release and return of the Five. To them, to those who are sadly no longer with us, to my family, friends, neighbors, and work colleagues, my sincere and eternal thanks.

Source: [La Jiribilla](#), translation [Resumen Latinoamericano, North America bureau](#)

