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Operation peter pan

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New documentary, 'Operation Peter Pan: Flying Back to Cuba,' explores return, 50 years after exodus

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"I left Cuba, but Cuba never left me."

That's how Candi Sosa expressed the longing she has felt for 40 years for the country where she was born and from which she - and thousands of Cuban children - was torn when she was 10.

Her dramatic story is reflected in a gripping documentary, "Operation Peter Pan: Flying Back to Cuba," by award-winning director Estela Bravo, a native New Yorker who lives in Cuba.

"There is no narration in the film," Bravo said. "It is just the people talking, it is just their words."

The result is a powerful documentary about one of the darkest episodes of the neverending cold war between the U.S. and Cuba.

The documentary recounts the story of a children's exodus that was part of a U.S. State Department operation quaintly known as Peter Pan, which played on fears that the Cuban

government would do away with parental rights. The State Department used the Catholic Church as the conduit in Miami through which the unaccompanied children were placed in camps, foster homes, orphanages and reformatories.

This clandestine operation was based on a lie that was bolstered by a bogus "law" doing away with parental rights. That law was printed and widely distributed in Cuba as part of a conspiracy to frighten parents into sending their children on a one-way trip to a foreign land.

In one of the largest airlifts of unaccompanied children ever, 14,000 were sent to the U.S. between 1961 and 1964.

Bravo follows a group of five Peter Pans - Sosa, Silvia Wilhelm, Ed Canler, Alex Lpez and Flora Gonz lez - who return almost 50 years after they were uprooted from Cuba.

The trip was the brainchild of Elly Vilano Chovel, a gentle and determined woman who was just 14 years old when she was sent away from Cuba by her frightened parents.

Chovel grew up to become a real estate broker. But later in life, driven by her love for Cuba, she founded the Grupo Pedro Pan in Miami. She dreamed of returning to Cuba with a group of her fellow Peter Pans, but that was not to be. She died in 2007, two years before the first group visited.

"Elly did not make it to Cuba, but she is the center of the film," Bravo said. "She was an extraordinary human being who found 2,000 of the Peter Pan children and brought them together for the first time in 50 years. The trip would not have happened without her."

Sosa, a singer, was one of those who made the journey back. Her story and that of their travel companions, is one of parental separation, total helplessness and in her case and that of Alex Lpez, a travel agent in Washington, of terrible emotional and sexual abuse. They are living testimony of the heartlessness and immorality of using children as political or ideological pawns.

Certainly there are success stories among the Peter Pan children and all of those - for instance, that of former Florida Republican Sen. Mel Martnez - have been well publicized. Yet few know the names of the thousands of Peter Pan children who were emotionally scarred for life. That's why Bravo's documentary is so important.

"My mother made the decision to send me away," Wilhelm said. "But the decision to come back was mine. We returned to Cuba to close the circle and make peace with ourselves, our history and our country."