

# A new beginning

*For Geovani Rodríguez,  
freedom means many things*

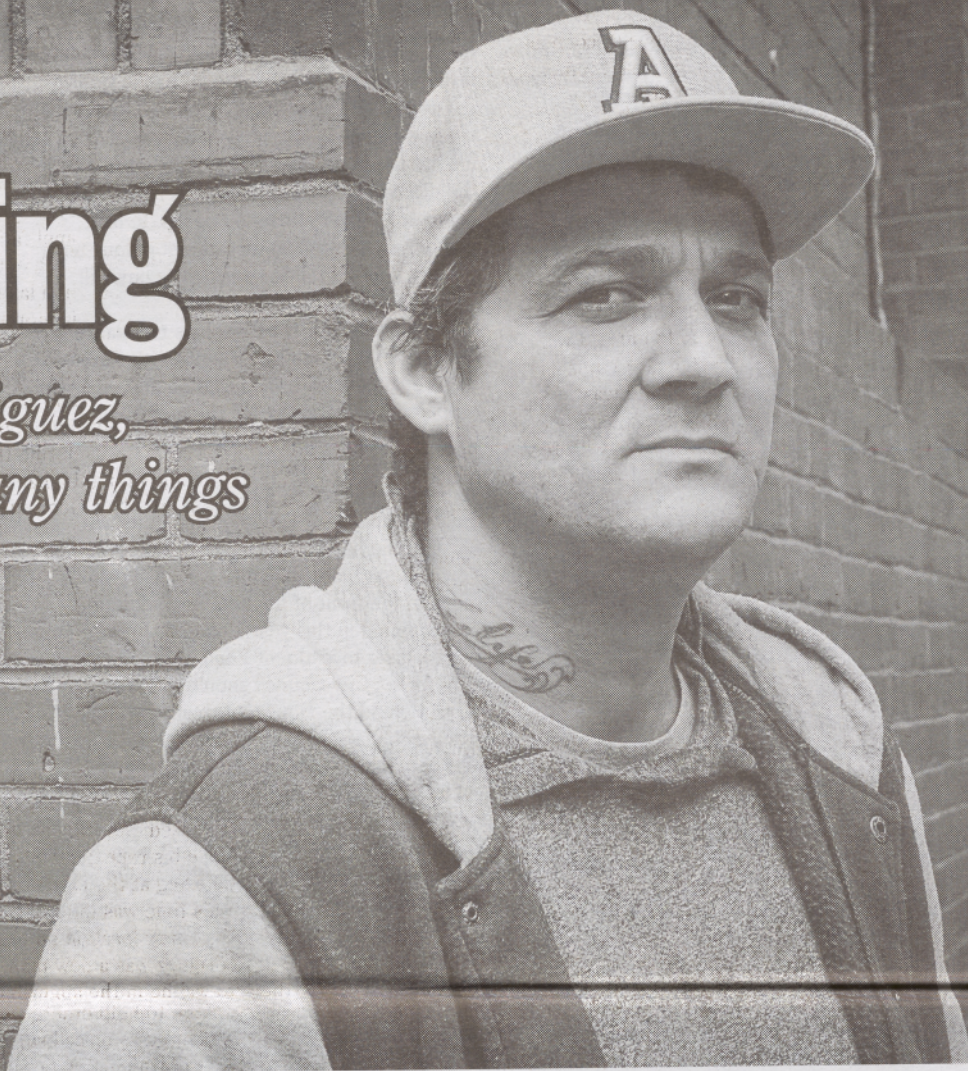


PHOTO BY JOE GLODE

**BY EMILY GREEN**  
STAFF WRITER

Geovani Rodríguez was 21 when he sailed away from Cuba on a homemade raft. He wasn't afraid of the voyage, he says, even though his younger brother, Herminio, died when he left the island nation on a similar vessel just four months earlier. Rodríguez grew up in what was once the beautiful city of Havana, living only two blocks from the sandy beaches where he spent his youth swimming and fishing in the warm waters where the Atlantic Ocean collides with the Gulf of Mexico.

"My childhood was perfect," he says. "I was aware of the limitations, but I was young."

He was an infant in 1973 when his father was imprisoned for speaking out against the communist government. Seven years later that government sent his father to Florida upon his release, he says.

As he grew into adulthood, Rodríguez became frustrated with the politics of his country and began to follow in his father's footsteps. He and his friends openly criticized President Fidel Castro's regime.

"We were regular guys. We were just speaking our minds; looking for that change," he says. "Eventually the police started getting on me because I was speaking about why it was wrong."

It was August 1994 when Rodríguez, now a wanted man, boarded that homemade raft with four of his lifelong friends and set sail for Florida.

It wasn't only political imprisonment he fled. Earlier that month, demonstrators filled the streets of Havana in protest of the country's economic crisis following its loss of Soviet subsidies. Cuba's economy had dived lower than ever before, with massive food shortages, daylong power outages and even common goods, like clothing and toiletries, were scarce.

"It was the worst it had ever been," says Rodríguez. It was in the midst of that chaotic period that his friends approached him: "We just made a raft. You want to leave?" He didn't hesitate. "I said OK. Let's go."

Because of his brother's recent death from attempting the very same journey, Rodríguez decided it'd be best to leave without saying a word. "It was going to be too hard for my mom," he says.

In the early morning hours, they boarded the raft, constructed from inner tubes and wooden planks, and pushed out into a calm blue sea. Homemade sails and paddles helped them navigate the waters. The weather cooperated and the small crew reached an island in the Florida Keys four days later without incident. To this day, Rodríguez doesn't know which island they reached.

The U.S. Coast Guard took the new arrivals to Miami, where Rodríguez was reunited with his father. But adjusting to life in the United States wasn't easy. "It was like a different culture, lifestyle - everything was new, and I got really depressed."

He missed his family and his home. He

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within Portland's immigrant communities.*

phoned his mother upon his arrival in Florida and, predictably, she was angry he had left. But the two have remained in close contact in the years since, despite the 2,700 miles between them.

Rodríguez says the United States was not what he expected. He was especially surprised, he says, by the racism he experienced.

"People came here with an idea that everything was going to be OK," he says. "It's true, this is the best opportunities here, but people came here (and) they don't know. They don't know how to reach the right resource, so it's easy to get trapped in gangs, in selling drugs, the party life."

With no English language skills or work experience, for a 21-year-old Rodríguez, it was the path of least resistance. For the first time in his life he started selling drugs and engaging in criminal activity.

He had been living in Miami for about a year when he traveled to Portland to visit a friend. He needed a change, and his friend asked him to stay. He didn't like the weather, but he says, "Portland was

different."

He never returned to Miami, but he soon fell back into the criminal lifestyle.

"I started doing the same thing I was doing in Florida," he says. "Back in the '90s, my mentality was different. I started selling drugs again and getting in trouble, and I knew that I was poisoning myself, because I started using coke heavy, and I think it was part of how I was killing my depression."

He was living in the Lloyd District and supporting a growing drug addiction, which now included heroin, meth and pills such as Oxycodone and Percocet, by selling cocaine. He learned English bit by bit, on the streets, "the bad stuff first," he says, which helped him interact with his customers.

"Between 1995 (and) 2009, I wrecked my life," he says. "In 1997 I had my daughter, and I tried to change, but I was already trapped in that life, I didn't know there was a way to get out of that life back then." For years he was in and out of jail and prison. "My everyday life was wake up, sell drug, consume drug, same thing. I was living in a self-destruction pattern."

Repeatedly, he'd get released from prison and end up homeless and sleeping on the streets and under bridges. He checked himself into Hooper Detoxification Center on Northeast Grand so many times, he says, he lost count. Each time, Rodríguez says, "It was the end of the road for me. To get to that point, it was really bad. I was like, I do this - or I am going to die."

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