

The way Bernardo Squires tells his story, he was born twice—both times on March 12 around 11 p.m.

## **His Journey**

In 1952, Bernardo was born in Caimanera, Cuba on March 12 to Jamaican and Trinidadian parents. Raised by his grandmother and taught by Jamaican teachers, Bernardo was a global citizen even before he left his home country.

His village sat nine miles from Guantanamo Bay. His and many of his friends' fathers worked on the base.

"In 1962 when we were in the middle of the Cuban Missile Crisis, everyone's father went to work at Gitmo and sent money back to their families," he said. His father took the job because he spoke English and wanted to help support his family. After several grueling years, his father left Cuba seeking refuge in the U.S. Bernardo didn't know if he'd ever see his father again.

"At the time, the law said if you were 15 or older and male you couldn't leave the country unless you performed military service," said Bernardo. It had been six years since he'd seen his father, and he had to find his missing family member.

But first, he had to get out of Cuba.

"Back then, the only way you could get out of Cuba was to end up in Guantanamo," he said.

And the only way to get to Guantanamo was to swim.

So Bernardo and several friends—nicknamed "guisanos," or worms—waited until the tide was out and began the very, very long swim across Guantanamo Bay.

"Sometimes boats would come by looking for people, and we had to hold our breath and duck under the water," Bernardo said. "One of my friends almost didn't make it. By the time we came ashore in Guantanamo, he was like a ghost. It took him a week before he was normal again."

But he and his friends made it. Once at the military base they sought refuge, and were taken by plane to Miami, coached through immigration and housed with other teenagers in a foster family. "One by one my friends all got in touch with their families in the U.S.," he said, "but I

didn't have a way to reach my father." In a time before in-home internet connections and cell phones, Bernardo had to use extensive family and friend connections, borrowed phones and almost a month of time before he had a phone number he hoped belonged to his father.

Around 11 p.m. on Bernardo's 16th birthday, Bernardo's father picked up his phone in Brooklyn, and was convinced his lost son had come back to life.

## **Moving Forward**

Bernardo finished high school in New York, attended trade school in Indiana and made a living in several states before taking over the role of caretaker at a little church in south Minneapolis. Saint Mary's Greek Orthodox Church on the west shore of Lake Calhoun would be Bernardo's home and livelihood for the next 17 years.

He had a home, a job and a new land-locked life in Minnesota. But—never one to slow down—Bernardo kept moving forward. He began dabbling in art.

"I wrote my first poem at age 27," he said. "I've been writing poems ever since then. I write about whatever comes to me—the writing itself isn't who I am. I'm just the receiver." He later picked up a job modeling for an art school in Uptown.

"There was a girl in one of the classes who kept stopping by to talk to me," he said. "I honestly didn't know why she kept coming by to visit. It never even occurred to me that she was interested in me."

He laughed. "Really, I was so dumb."

Bernardo now has five children in or nearing adulthood. The girl from art school who kept stopping by to chat—now his wife—is still a practicing artist.

Many years later, Bernardo was trying to save money for his kids to go to college. When his job at the church in south Minneapolis was cut, he knew in his heart where he wanted to be.

"I aimed high and aimed at MCTC. I knew that working there was going to help my family so much."

As he makes his rounds of the campus during afternoons and evenings, Bernardo's beaming smile goes with him to each classroom he visits. Working second shift as a general maintenance worker gives him time to exercise and meditate each morning—something he uses to minimize the stress caused by a heart condition.

"I've been here now since 2008, he said. "In fact...yesterday was my anniversary."

He didn't have to wait long to see the benefit MCTC had on his family: Two of his children have attended or graduated from MCTC, and a third begins classes in January.

"I do my very best because I've always been like that," said Bernardo, who still practices his own form of art. "What inspires poets is the truth. Sometimes I come home and I feel frustrated, so I just write. It helps a lot. That's why when you see me, I always have a smile on my face."

"I love it here. I really want to be here until I retire."

*The manner*

*is the way – you color with emotion*

*the spectrum of the day – beneath the sun*

*and sky*

*your thought was just a seed*

*lying dormant in the garden – when winter passes*

*it will awake*

*to reveal the heart's intent.*

-From *Honor Sleeps Within the Heart*, by Bernardo Squires