

Nestled between the palm trees and well-worn buildings of Old Miami is Leo's Pizza, a quaint family-owned pizza shop that has held the location for as long as I can remember. The store appears to have never done any major remodeling, giving it the look of a 80s shop straight out of an old sitcom. Inside are a handful of creaky booths and tables – usually empty – and the two founders of the shop, cooking pizzas since they began. To the casual observer, this pizza shop is a derelict remnant of thirty years ago, but to its faithful customers, it is the best pizza to be found in all of Miami. This place, to me, is the site of a sacred tradition, a tradition that began with my older brother and my grandfather, mi abuelo, and has been passed on to me. This place was the premier spot to eat after a hard day of working at the auto shop with my grandfather. In this place, the outside world melted away and all that remained was family, delicious food, and the creaky table we shared.

My grandparents had fled Cuba with my mother and aunt in 1980, part of the Mariel boatlifts, seeking a better life in the United States. From the minute my abuelo reached the States, he began working to improve the lives of his family, finding work where he could before finally settling on auto glass installation. He worked this job for many years, only recently having officially closed up shop at the age of 76, managing to achieve his goal of raising his family out of poverty. While he still worked his job, he would take my older brother out to work as well, and when I matured, he would take me. Working with him showed us first-hand the sacrifices he made for the family. The work was strenuous. I struggled carrying heavy sheets of auto glass, a task he had performed hundreds of times before without assistance. As we would wrap up the job he'd routinely give his most sincere advice: "This is why you have to study, so you don't have to do what I do." I would always absentmindedly reply with "si" or "yo se," yet remembered those simple yet influential words. Instead of dwelling on the impending future, we'd look forward to what was bound to come next: pizza time.

A visit to Leo's wasn't just about the food (albeit it being the best around). More importantly, Leo's was the one place to spend alone time with my grandfather that didn't involve work or other family members. At Leo's, I could muster my best Spanish and converse with my grandfather about anything. There is a trove of anecdotes and personal recollections my grandparents could provide, yet I would hardly ever hear them firsthand. It was upsetting that the stories of life in their homeland were rarely told, due in part by my insistence on asking them for it. Yet at Leo's, these untapped wells of knowledge and tales would spill out of my grandfather from the inquiries I made. Times at Leo's were moments to listen in on

the story of my family in Cuba, the ups and downs, and the arrival to America. Times at Leo's were moments to bond with him like no other place could offer.

Leo's Pizza was certainly not upscale, was certainly not a calm and tranquil place, and was certainly not a young enterprise. Yet the dilapidated booth seats and tables; the inviting smile of the old cashier; the aroma of fresh pizza; the thin paper plates and Styrofoam cups brimming with Coke; and most importantly my grandfather's rapid storytelling in his native tongue- followed by his beaming smile - make this otherwise unnoticeable remnant of old Miami the place where I am most perfectly content.