

# Missoulian

## American story: Cuban refugee overcame 82-minute swim, family tragedies, addictions to make new life in U.S., Montana

By KEILA SZPALLER of the Missoulian | Posted: Saturday, August 15, 2009 11:15 pm

Jose Auraz was not afraid that the sea creatures brushing up against him in the water might be sharks.

He had coated himself in used motor oil to keep them away, a trick he'd learned from fishermen in Guantanamo Bay.

The fear came later, after he swam away from Cuba in the dark and in the rain and crossed the line to the American side.

As the 29-year-old man pushed under the waves, with one leg cramped and one arm numb, Auraz hoped to be adopted into the United States.

"I coming to your country for the American dream."

He swam one hour and 22 minutes. Then a strobe light caught him, and he heard the sound of an American soldier chambering a round.

That day was Nov. 20, 1993.

This is his story, as he tells it. On Thursday, Aug. 13, 2009, the YMCA in Missoula offered Auraz a job as long as he could pass a drug test. (Auraz said he would do so with no problem.)

The man who loves mountains has a knack for remembering dates, and there's another one burned into his mind and his wallet. Sitting at the Poverello Center where he once lived, Auraz opened his eelskin billfold and pulled out a permanent resident identification card.

The date is fresh. The card is good for a decade, until July 28, 2019.

"Permanent," Auraz said. "Permanent."

Since the U.S. military dropped him off in Miami after his swim through the waters dividing the Cuban and U.S.-controlled areas of Guantanamo Bay, Auraz had feared Americans would return him to Cuba. Meanwhile, over the years, the obstacles mounted.

In Miami, humidity and \$4.50-an-hour wages.

In Las Vegas, poker games that lost him Ben Franklins.

In Petaluma, Calif., threats of street crime: "People almost kill me for \$10."

And everywhere, bureaucratic red tape. Everywhere, 40-ounce bottles of rum that lasted him just two days.

Auraz grew up in the town of Caimanera, the son of a father who cleaned fishing boats and ran a dry-cleaning shop. The Castro regime tried to take away his family's home, and he cared little for his country's close ally, the Soviet Union.

"I never agreed with the communist people, the Russian people in my country," Auraz said.

At 24 years old, he attempted his first escape in the canal and succeeded only in marking himself as a possible fugitive. So he bided his time in the military, working his way up to the rank of sergeant.

At 29, he started practicing his swimming in the sea, four miles daily. Some people suspected he was plotting another escape, but he threw them off the scent: "I said I was training for competition. When I go in Havana, I want first place."

The evening before he left, he went to a birthday party, sharp in his uniform, clean-shaven so he wouldn't look familiar.

Auraz had told just one man of his plan, a fellow military member who begged Auraz to take him along, but who passed out at the party. When Auraz left the gathering late that night, he tucked a goodbye note in his friend's hand and marched to the coastline, where the other patrol officers took him for one of them.

The rain had started pattering, a good sign for a man who didn't want to be seen.

"Plink, plink, plink."

He hid in the bushes. Then he stripped off his uniform and stood on the bank wearing only swim shorts and a watch. The wristpiece, it's true, was Russian, but it also was waterproof.

Last week, Auraz wore an altogether different look, and he sat easy in an office of the Poverello Center, a place once his home, a community always his refuge. He's a laborer, a dishwasher, a building framer.

In blue jeans, a ball cap, a long-sleeved shirt with cuffs folded back, he and development director Keenan Whitt talked about the journey that brought Auraz to Missoula, and then one day to the front steps of 535 Ryman St.

"Yeah, I'm afraid," Auraz said of his first walk to the door of the shelter and soup kitchen. "I no see no Españols."

But he'd run out of options. His wife, who had moved the couple to be near family in Alberton and to attend the University of Montana, had left. His personal belongings disappeared too.

"I had no ID with me ... no sleeping bag. No blanket," Auraz said. "I have my clothes."

In Miami, Auraz had washed dishes to earn money, wiring home every other paycheck to help his family buy the home the government had tried to take away. He barely spoke English, but after three months, he asked for a raise from \$4.50 an hour to \$5.

In a city where the immigrants were shorted more often than rewarded, the boss gave him \$5.25.

At the Pov, Auraz told a worker his story in November 2007. The shelter took him in, and he put his old skills back to use, washing dishes daily. He stopped drinking rum so he could spend the night. And he yearned for more.

To really get on his feet, Auraz was going to need a job, and for that, he needed papers. Documents, though, meant lawyers he didn't have money to pay.

For one year, Whitt said Poverello Center director Ellie Hill went on the hunt for an immigration attorney who would take his case. It wasn't an easy pitch. Missing documents complicated the case, as did the request for pro bono work. Thirteen lawyers later, Shahid Haque-Hausrath, a lawyer at the Border Crossing Law Firm in Helena, agreed to take on the task.

And he succeeded.

"My life changed when I received my employment authorization," Auraz said.

It had changed that night in the canal, of course. When the Americans pulled him onto their boat, they first took him for a spy: "Surrender. What are you doing on this side?"

The military held him for nine days, and one day, Auraz saw an old friend of his father's, a cook at the camp.

"Are you the son of Pepe, the tintorero?"

"Yeah. Tell my mother and my daddy I'm alive."

"You know your mother cry a lot."

He did, but he'd wanted to celebrate his 30th birthday "on the other side."

On the other side, the Americans dropped him off in Miami, and Auraz began chasing dollars across the country. In Sin City, he married, but the honeymoon at the MGM poker tables didn't last.

"Very soon, I put a \$100 through the machine, a hundred dollar bill."

When his wife died of cancer, he became angry and fled to California. There, he remarried and answered a call of \$12-an-hour pay in Washington state, where his wife bore him a son and a daughter.

In Missoula, he was forced to stop chasing flimsy promises. He says his wife left him for another man and took their little girl with her. Auraz was in no position to fight back. Homeless, illegal and missing ID and documentation, he lost his son, an autistic child, to the state.

He fell into a depression, and he joked that it could have been bad news for the hippie who left with his woman: "He lucky I no kill him. She lucky I no kill both."

Auraz has since taken to Missoula, a place with mountains that remind him of Cuba. Montaña means mountain in Spanish, he says. His father died in Cuba in 2004 from lung cancer, but he'd like to return to visit his mother.

"She goes through two heart attacks, and she's still alive," he said. "I think she's still waiting for me."

Since January, he's been living in a studio in the Howard Apartments, and he continues to wash dishes at the Pov. He's a bright light to the staff, who see many people who are broken, not so many who mend.

"There's so many sad stories here, you have to revel in the good moments," Whitt said.

He's a good citizen, too. Auraz, who is missing some teeth, testified before the 2009 Montana Legislature on behalf of a "Good Samaritan" bill. It allows dentists to volunteer at places such as the Pov and be covered by its insurance, allowing people like Auraz to get dental help.

He tries to help Pov residents who drink too much, and plans to volunteer for the Roots Festival, and on Saturdays, he plays the bucket bass downtown during the farmers markets.

"When Jose is happy, he glows," Whitt said. "You walk up the street, and he just glows."

Now, his papers are in order, and deportation is not a risk. He regularly sees his 8-year-old son, who lives in Missoula under the care of a nurse. He'd like to see more of his daughter, in another state.

He has lonely moments, but Auraz said these days, he sleeps "like a king."

It sounds like he sings like one, too, even with his missing teeth.

"You know what I sing?"

He breaks into "La Bamba," and Whitt laughs with him across the desk.

"Para bailar La Bamba," it goes. "Se necessita una poca de gracia." To dance the Bamba, you need a little grace.

"Yo no soy, marinero, soy capitan." I'm not a sailor, I'm a captain.

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