

TOPEKA As a teenager, **Carlos Mayans** pulled from the garbage a pair of cutoff jeans and a T-shirt that he wore for 43 straight days in a Florida refugee camp.

Today, he prefers natty, double-breasted suits as a member of the Kansas House of Representatives.

But Mayans, R-Wichita, who came to the United States from Cuba in 1962, hasn't forgotten his roots.

He remembers how, in his youth, American classmates amused themselves by asking him to repeat sentences and phrases so they could hear the words mangled by his accent. But he never tried to get rid of the accent.

"I am where I am today because of the things my parents taught me when I was very little," Mayans said. "We were always taught to look for opportunities. When you're looking for barriers, what do you do? You look down."

The gregarious Mayans, 45, is serving his second year in the House of Representatives. Earlier this year, his parents, who three decades ago had to protect him from Fidel Castro's soldiers, sat in the House balcony and watched their son.

In the House, Mayans' politics are undeniably Republican and conservative. For example, he opposes gun control. His argument is that if gun control laws become strict enough, the government the police and soldiers have the guns and "run the roost."

He knows firsthand.

Less than a month before he left Cuba at age 13, a half-dozen soldiers knocked on the door of his family's Havana home one night, looking for him. He's vague about the reason perhaps he hadn't checked in with a block parent but his mother told him to hide under his bed. The soldiers left after she refused to let them in.

A year before, he and his father were walking home from an aunt's house when a car pulled up across the street and soldiers began pushing people inside.

"They turned around and looked at us and said: 'Hey, you, the two of you. Come. Get in this car, too,'" Mayans recalled. "And my father said: 'Don't even look back. Just keep on walking. If they want us, they'll come and get us.'"

During one speech on the House floor, Mayans warned his colleagues that what he saw in American society state intervention in family affairs reminded him of Cuba after Castro took over

Jan. 1, 1959.

(The following paragraph appeared in the State Edition only).

"They were big in having the children report on the parents," Mayans said. "When you divide a family, you can control the population."

Joe De La Torre, a special assistant to the secretary of state, said Mayans' experiences in Cuba under Castro aren't unusual.

"Carlos, he's extremely passionate," De La Torre said. "He doesn't want this country to go through what the island went through."

Mayans was born in Havana in 1948, the oldest of three children, the son of a chemist who worked three months each year at a sugar factory and nine months as a professor of agriculture. The family was middle class, with his father earning about \$7,500 a year a good wage.

After Castro took power, the family gave away two-thirds of its savings \$20,000 to relatives so the communists wouldn't confiscate it. The new regime did take the family's interest in a hotel and an apartment complex.

The government told the family it could spend 100 pesos a month, about one-fifth of what his father made as a professor. It didn't matter, though, Mayans said, because there was little to buy and food was rationed.

His parents pulled him, his brother and sister out of school in 1961 and taught them at home. Then, his parents decided they wanted a new life.

His brother, Rolando, and sister, Grisell, left Cuba in March 1962. Mayans made the trip a month later and spent 48 days at a refugee camp in the Florida Everglades, separated from his siblings.

He learned his siblings were in Conway Springs, about 25 miles southwest of Wichita. He found himself in a boys home in Wichita but stayed only 10 days after other boys threatened to beat him up.

After 2 1/2 years in separate foster homes near Conway Springs, Mayans and his brother and sister moved in with a Wichita family. Then his parents came from Cuba, and the family reunited in 1967.

The entire family worked, for less than \$2 an hour each. Mayans had three jobs to help the family and to pay for his lunches and tuition at Kapaun High School in Wichita.

After a year in the Army and his graduation from Georgia State University, he took an insurance job.

He came back to Wichita in 1976 for his sister's wedding, where he met his future wife, Linda. He quit his job in Connecticut and returned to Wichita, where he started his own insurance agency.

He became a U.S. citizen in 1978.

Mayans decided to run for the House in 1990 after serving four years on the Catholic Church's advisory council for its American bishops. He lost the Republican primary by only 58 votes.

He won his House seat in 1992.

"I wrote a little list of things I could have done better, and, if done, I would win the next election," he said. "And I posted it next to my desk in my insurance office for two years."

#### CITATION (CMS STYLE)

Hanna, John. "FLIGHT FROM CUBA, HARDSHIPS SHAPE WICHITA LAWMAKER." *Wichita Eagle, The (KS)*, May 1, 1994: 2B. *NewsBank: America's News*. <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=NewsBank&docref=news/0EADB5FDB46DE537>.

Copyright (c) 1994 The Wichita Eagle