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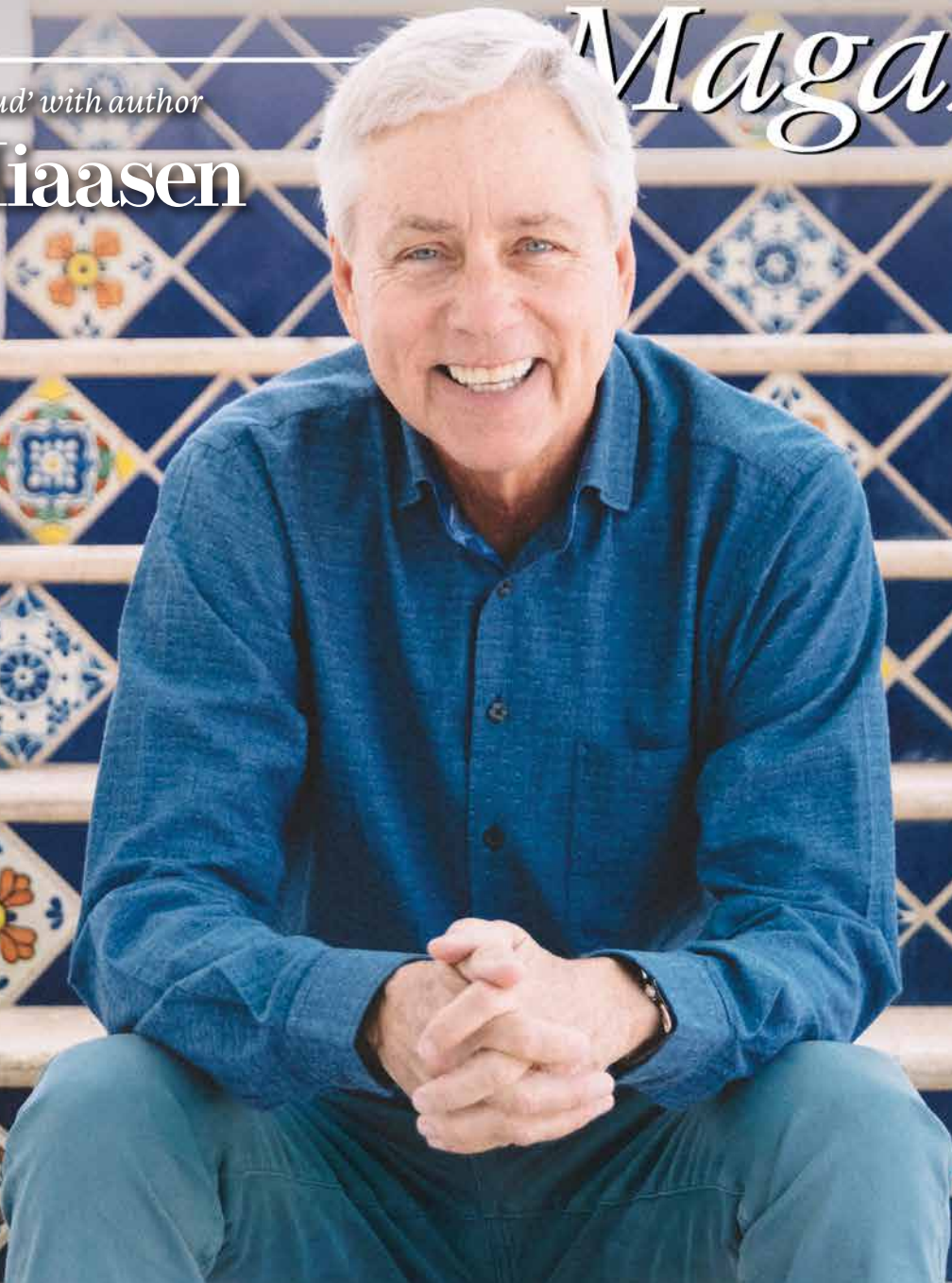
Vero Beach

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'Laughing Out Loud' with author

Carl Hiaasen



Yearning to Breathe Free | January 2023 | REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION © VERO BEACH MAGAZINE



The Community Foundation presents a donation to the Samaritan Center, which offers transitional housing and life-skills development to homeless families in Indian River County.

Yearning to Breathe Free

IMMIGRANTS ARE WILLING TO FACE GREAT ADVERSITY IN SEEKING A BETTER LIFE



BY JEFFREY R. PICKERING

The beach was uncharacteristically empty on the morning of September 8, 2016 as I walked toward the cove at South Beach. The sunrise cast a brilliant golden hue across the cerulean sea and onto the sand, illuminating an unusually large shape in the distance.

At first, I did not believe my eyes, but as I approached, the distinct outline of a boat's stern

and gunwales came into focus. When I reached the marooned vessel, I found a 14-foot open-bow sloop made entirely from Styrofoam, duct tape, and blue paint. A wooden mast and rudder lay in the bottom of the hull along with empty soda cans and sardine tins inscribed in Spanish and Russian respectively.

I wondered about the brave souls who made the roughly 300-nautical-mile

voyage from Cuba to Vero Beach. How desperate must their lives have been to risk such a perilous journey in a homemade boat? What were they hoping to achieve here in the United States? Wherever they were, I knew they were a long way from home and likely in search of a place of refuge—not unlike the thousands of immigrants and refugees who have arrived on Florida's shores for centuries.

When Indian River Community Foundation published the findings of its most recent community needs assessment in 2020, a trend of a more racially and ethnically diverse county population was reported. Hispanics represented the fastest-growing minority group in Indian River County, many having immigrated from Latin America and the Caribbean. Creole-speaking Haitian immigrants were also represented in the study. While most enter the United States lawfully, either by meeting family, employment, refugee, or asylum requirements, approximately 3 percent of Indian

River County's population are undocumented immigrants and 2 percent are lawful permanent residents who have yet to complete the naturalization process.

When compared to the overall U.S. population, with 14 percent being foreign born, Florida stands out with 21 percent of its population born in other countries. Cuba, Haiti, Colombia, Mexico, and Jamaica account collectively for about half of Florida's immigrants, and increasing numbers are also coming from Venezuela. Some of the more remote points of departure include Iraq, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Sudan. While

most settle in Dade County, a growing number of immigrants and refugees have made their way to Indian River County in search of economic opportunity and a chance at greater health and prosperity.

As they have done for decades, these immigrants fill the most challenging jobs in agriculture, construction, housekeeping, and related service industries. With limited affordable housing, they often pool resources to find a place to live or settle for substandard options. Language barriers and associated literacy challenges present other difficulties. Still, they persevere.

Immigrants and refugees who settle in Indian River County are provided with a range of services by a handful of local charitable organizations with missions focused on serving the needs of various vulnerable populations. Many are provided by faith-based organizations, such as Catholic Charities, that focus on meeting basic human needs. Others, like RCMA, have a long history of providing immigrant families with affordable, high-quality childcare. Together, these programs and services add up to hundreds of thousands of dollars spent and hundreds of volunteer hours donated to help immigrants



How desperate must their lives have been to risk such a perilous journey in a homemade boat?

A makeshift vessel, made with Styrofoam and held together with duct tape, floated ashore at South Beach in 2016.

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Approximately 3 percent of Indian River County’s population are undocumented immigrants.

and refugees who have made Indian River County, Florida their home.

One organization whose staff and volunteers dedicate time and resources to immigrants learning English as a second language is Literacy Services. With regular help from tutors, adult students, many of whom are parents with children attending schools within the School District of Indian River County, can become more proficient reading, writing, and speaking English. In many cases, this enables them to gain better employment and participate more fully in their children’s education. It also prepares many to pursue the goal of obtaining U.S. citizenship.

In Indian River County, there are approximately 3,000 lawful permanent residents (aka “green-card holders”) who are foreign born and authorized to live in the United States. Almost all of these members of the community fall into what the United Way of Indian River County calls the ALICE population, which stands for “asset limited income constrained employed.” Beyond processing times for naturalization applications, which can take more than one year,



Shelves filled with books for all ages are available for students at the Literacy Services office to help them gain skills in reading, writing, and speaking English.

the two biggest barriers for immigrants who are eligible to naturalize are access to competent legal counsel and the associated expenses.

At an average cost of \$2,500 per case, outright payment of what amounts

for many of these lawful permanent residents to one month’s salary or more is not a workable solution. As a result, the decision to pursue full citizenship is delayed or put off indefinitely. As a result, these

members of our community cannot vote, hold certain public offices, or hold certain civic service positions. They also face the risk of detention or possible deportation for certain offenses. When this happens,

communities are affected, families are separated, and business is disrupted—all for a lack of a relatively modest amount of money that could be donated by any number of the kind and generous people who call Indian River County home.

In September in the Florida Straits between Cuba and the United States' southernmost point, the seas can be rough, and the waters are always shark infested. I can think of many ways I would rather pursue a better life than from the bow of a Styrofoam boat held together by duct tape and paint. What must go through the minds of the person making such a journey? Perhaps it is something like this:

Whatever the cost, I know that life in the United States is filled with opportunity and many caring people who will empathize with my desire for a better life for myself and my family. I am willing to work, I will obey your laws, I will honor your customs and traditions, and I will share my own. I will pledge my allegiance to your flag, fulfilling the promise of the greatest country on earth. Treat me with dignity and respect and I will show you the best of what my country of origin has to offer while doing my part to contribute to the greater good in my new home. America, the beautiful. With liberty and justice for all. ☼



Elizabeth, a student at Literacy Services, takes advantage of the organization's life-changing programs.