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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Riding My Father's Motorcycle

By ALEIDA GUEVARA

When I read "The Motorcycle Diaries" for the first time, it was just a sheaf of typewritten pages. Still, I identified immediately with this man who narrated his adventures in such a spontaneous way. As I continued reading, I began to realize that the writer was my father.

There were moments when I took his traveling companion's place on the motorbike and clung to my dad's back, journeying with him over the mountains and around the lakes. I admit there were some points at which I stopped reading, especially when he describes so graphically things I would never talk about myself. When he does, however, he reveals yet again just how honest and unconventional he could be. To tell you the truth, the more I read, the more in love I was with the boy my father had been.

I got to know the young Ernesto Che Guevara better: the 23-year-old who left Argentina with a yearning for adventure and dreams of the great deeds he would perform, and who, as he discovered the reality of our continent, continued to mature as a human being and to develop as a social being. Slowly we see how his dreams and ambitions changed.

The young man who makes us smile at the beginning with his absurdities and craziness becomes increasingly sensitive as he tells us about the complex indigenous world of Latin America, the poverty of its people and the exploitation to which they are submitted. In spite of it all, he never loses his sense of humor, which instead becomes finer and more subtle.

My father, "ése, el que fue" ("myself, the man I used to be"), as he identifies himself, shows us a Latin America that few of us know, describing its landscapes with words that color each image and reach into our senses, so that we can see what his eyes took in.

His awareness grows that what poor people need is not so much his scientific knowledge as a doctor, but rather his strength and persistence in trying to bring about the social change that would enable them to recover the dignity that had been taken from them and trampled on for centuries. With his thirst for knowledge and his great capacity to love, he shows us how reality, if properly interpreted, can permeate a human being to the point of changing his or her way of thinking. I was only 6 when my father died, 37 years ago today, so I have few memories. I got to know my father only as I grew up. My mother, Aleida March, loved him very deeply, and shared his ideals, which she passed on to her

children. What I remember most is my father's great capacity for love.

I often describe myself as a genetic accident; I had the honor and privilege of being the daughter of a man and a woman who are very special people. And I am also a product of the Cuban revolution.

I am a pediatrician, specializing in allergies, in Havana. When I was young, my father's image did influence me, but I later chose medicine as a way to be closer to my people. I've also worked as a doctor in Nicaragua, Angola and Ecuador.

We are happy as a family when my father's image inspires people to learn more about him and his thinking, but often the commercialization seems to us like a lack of respect for who he was and what he stood for.

Since the 1980's, we - Che's family and others - have been working on his unpublished manuscripts. These were maintained as part of his personal archive, and in large part were and continue to be jealously guarded by my mother. To publish anything written by him that he himself did not intend for publication - as is the case with the notes that became "The Motorcycle Diaries" - serious editing work is required. We can't omit text, but at the same time we can't be completely sure he would have given his permission for the text to be published as it was originally written. That is why we have a commitment to edit what he wrote without changing what he meant - a very difficult task.

A Cuban publishing house published "The Motorcycle Diaries" for the first time in 1993. Of the many books that my father wrote, it is one of my favorites, because this book brings the young Ernesto closer to other young people in the world today - which is the most important thing - showing how people can be changed if they are sensitive to their surroundings.

Although there is only one copy of the Walter Salles' film "The Motorcycle Diaries" on the island, those Cubans who have seen it have great things to say about it. It is entertaining, tender and profound.

Though we no longer live in the 1950's and 1960's, unfortunately the conditions in Latin America that provoked a profound change in the young Che Guevara still exist in many parts of our continent and the world, and with an increasingly brutal impact. Have the film and the book become so popular because his strength and tenderness are a model for the people we need in these times? I believe this is the case and I am proud to live among people who not only love him, but who put into practice his desire to create a world that is far more just.

Aleida Guevara, the eldest daughter of Ernesto Che Guevara and Aleida March, is the author of the forthcoming "Chávez, Venezuela and the New Latin America." This article was translated by Pilar Aguilera from the Spanish.