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Cuban Delia Barroso, 102, blows out the cake candles during her birthday in Havana. — AFP photos



Cuban Rigoberta Santovenia, 102, walks in the kitchen at her house in Havana.



Cuban Delia Barroso, 102, talks to her great-great-granddaughter during her birthday in Havana.

## Cuban centenarians, cheered on by family, aim for 120

Looking into a mirror, Delia Barrios applies blush and lipstick—she wants to look her best for her 102nd birthday celebration, when she will be surrounded by loved ones. Barrios is one of more than 2,000 people in impoverished Cuba who are 100 years or old—a reality that has piqued the interest of experts, and led some to aim for even longer lives. “I don’t feel like I’m this old. I have a family... that loves me a lot. That helps me to feel good,” said Barrios.

She deftly maneuvers her motorized wheelchair with her seven-year-old great-great-granddaughter Patricia on her lap. Only two candles were placed on her birthday cake, which Barrios blew out to the applause of around 30 guests gathered in the courtyard of a building in Havana’s Playa neighborhood. When she was in her 60s, Barrios was diagnosed with colon cancer and told she had only a year to live.



Cuban Delia Barroso, 102, listens to a singer during her birthday in Havana.



Cuban Delia Barroso (center), 102, talks to family and friends during her birthday in Havana.



Cuban Delia Barroso, 102, applies makeup for her birthday in Havana.



An old man poses for a picture in a road of Havana.

She defied the odds and then left Cuba in 1993, when the island nation was in the throes of a major economic crisis, for the United States, where her son lives. But two decades later, Barrios suffered several falls and her doctor said she could no longer live alone. Barrios—who says she “danced a lot” when she was younger, smoked and drank on occasion—came home and moved in with her granddaughter Yumi, who is now 59.

## ‘120 Club’

There are currently 2,070 centenarians in Cuba out of a population of 11.2 million—in a country where the average life expectancy is 79.5 years. Those figures are comparable to those in many wealthier nations, despite the fact that Cuba’s average public salary is just \$30 a month. The socialist country, where health care is free and doctors are numerous, now has a “120 Club” that encourages residents to aim for that ripe old age. “Biologically, it has been proven that humans can live for 120 to 125 years,” said Raul Rodriguez, a doctor and president of the “120 Club,” which was created in 2003 by Fidel Castro’s personal doctor, Eugenio Selman-Housein.

The club “tries to promote healthy lifestyles for all, because that’s the only way to get to that age,” said Rodriguez. The elderly generally receive a pension of just \$10 a month. But the government has set up cafeterias for those unable to supplement that meager amount with help from family members living abroad. Centenarians are venerated and get special attention. “We try to provide them with specific care,” said Alina Gonzalez Moro from the Center for Research on Longevity (CITED). “All centenarians in Havana can call us if they have a health problem and a specialist in geriatrics will immediately go see the patient.”

## Taking care of family

With a surprisingly smooth face and a mischievous look in her eye, Rigoberta Santovenia turned 102 in January. “I didn’t think I’d get to this age... and here I am,” she said, sitting comfortably on a sofa. Santovenia walks quickly despite her cane, and was still cooking until recently but doctors advised her to stop. She also stopped sewing but can still thread a needle and reads the newspaper every day without using glasses. What’s her secret? “I’m very family-oriented—I love my children, my grand-children, my six great-grandchildren. I’ve never been alone,” she said.

Santovenia lives in the Vedado neighborhood with a grandson and her 68-year-old daughter Regla, who looks after her. “It’s my duty because she’s given me everything,” said Regla. “Now I have to thank her by taking care of her.” And she’s convinced her mother will make it to 120. “Her great-grandmother was a slave. Slave blood seems to be stronger—that’s why she’s kept going so long.”

## ‘Propaganda’ myth?

Experts are a bit baffled as to why Cubans are living so long.

“The family support network tends to help with longevity. We see that in Japan too,” said Robert Young, an expert at the US-based Gerontology Research Group.

Warm weather helps too. But Young says Cuba may not be telling the whole truth—claims that its people are living longer than elsewhere could be “a myth that’s used for ideologic propaganda purposes.” Vincent Geloso, an economics professor at King’s University College in Canada and author of an article on the subject for Oxford University, says Cuban doctors “have targets to reach or they’re punished.”

He suggested statistics could be manipulated as they once were in the Soviet Union, such as recording infant deaths as pre-natal in order to keep down mortality rates, which would reduce the life expectancy figures. However, “even with the worst-case scenario of manipulation, Cuba remains a place with a high life expectancy in relation to revenue.” The conundrum could be explained by one key factor: car ownership is low in Cuba, and hence there are fewer car accidents.

He also cites food rationing during the economic crisis in the 1990s, which helped keep diabetes rates down. “Cuba does very well in keeping people alive a long time,” he said. “But if you offered Cubans a choice between one more year and, for example, higher salaries or a different education, what do you think they would choose?” — AFP



Cuban Delia Barroso (center), 102, talks to family and friends during her birthday in Havana.



Tara Asher sign language interpreter

## Court bans street artists from performing in Rio subway carriages

A Brazilian court has banned street artists in Rio de Janeiro from performing in subway carriages, saying they disturb commuters’ “tranquility”. In a ruling earlier this week, the Rio Court of Justice said a law introduced last year allowing and regulating performance art inside metro and train cars was “unconstitutional”. Federal senator Flavio Bolsonaro—the eldest son of President Jair Bolsonaro—had challenged the legislation. “It is up to each person to choose, according to their values and convictions, what type of art to attend and at what moment,” Judge Heleno Pereira Nunes said in a decision supported by the majority of the court.

Passengers should be able to “exercise their right to tranquility, which is not possible when exposed to shouting and loud noises from musical instruments.” Under the pretext of spreading their “art”, various groups practice political and ideological indoctrination,” the judge wrote. Edson Ramos, representative of the Metro Artists group, told AFP the court’s decision was “arbitrary, without hearing the artists.” The artists are considering lodging an appeal, while others thumbed their nose at the ruling and continued to perform in carriages this week. “We are not there just to pass around a hat, but also to make a positive contribution,” said singer Dener Rangel Alves. “Today a passenger told me that my music soothed his soul.” MetroRio, the private operator of the city’s metro system, told AFP it would comply with the court’s decision. But it promised to expand a program that currently allows registered artists to perform inside three stations. — AFP

## Stormzy makes Glastonbury history, but sign interpreter steals show

British grime star Stormzy made history before throbbing crowds at the Glastonbury music festival this weekend—but it was Tara Asher, his sign language interpreter, who may have stolen the show. Footage of Asher swaying, rocking and mouthing along Stormzy’s performance Friday of the uniquely London style of rap lit up social media and gave new recognition to the art of bringing music to the hard of hearing and the deaf.

“I live in London so I understand what the slang means,” said Asher, who was one of two interpreters working the crowds when Stormzy became the first black UK solo artist to headline the annual event in its 49-year history.

“The struggle with specifically grime music is the speed and also the double meanings and metaphors because, at first listen, you won’t understand the underlying threads throughout the song,” the 30-year-old told AFP at the gig. “So it’s kind of unpicking and unpacking the song and ensuring that you deliver that message that the artist is trying to get across.”

## ‘Feel the vibrations’

Still only 25, Stormzy is a cult figure in the British grime scene, which blends Jamaican dancehall and hip hop for a pulsating, hard-edged sound that first electrified London nearly two decades ago. Stormzy’s biggest hits now appear in TV ads and blast out of cars cruising past

London clubs at night. He is also celebrated for spearheading the fight for racial justice, creating his own scholarship for black students admitted to Cambridge and seeking fair representation of minorities at other universities. But freelance poet Danna Williams, who is in her 30s, never had a chance to experience Stormzy’s magic spell because she cannot hear—until Tara made it happen on a hot, steamy night. “That was amazing,” Williams said, visibly thrilled. “I felt the vibrations. I was watching his attitude and his message. I really, really enjoyed it.”

## ‘Focus on Tara’

Asher performed from a separate stage that drew around 50 people with troubled hearing who trekked to the annual five-day celebration of sun, mud and music on a southwestern England field. She is not terribly pleased about the arrangement because it moves deaf people to the back and away from the dancing throngs. “Actually, in America they are much more advanced than us, (deaf people) have much more of a legal standing,” said Asher. “We would love to be a bit closer because deaf people would love to be in the crowd and experience that,” she observed.

“But it’s better than nothing.” Fans like Zoe McWhinney, a 22-year-old theatre student, were still thrilled about the whole thing. “You can see the interpreter, but you also have the screen in the background and

so it’s quite easy to actually watch both at the same time,” McWhinneys said. “My focus was mainly on Tara and that’s the reason why I enjoyed it so much.”

## ‘Guessing game’

Behind all the energy and enthusiasm of Asher’s interpretation of street music lie years of hard work and study that few others have dared do. Asher said it takes around seven years to become a qualified sign language interpreter. She has been a professional for 11 years now and doing music festivals for the past four. “It’s very specialist. It’s very niche. It’s not something every sign language interpreter would do—and it’s not something every sign language interpreter can do,” Asher said. She went into Friday night having learned 21 of Stormzy’s songs.

But every show is different and Asher just has to go with the flow when artists take their songs in a new direction or play something completely new. “The biggest issues that we have is that I don’t know what they’re going to do, I don’t get a set list so it’s a guessing game,” said Asher. The main thing, she continued, is to study the performer and have a feel for how the show will go. “Preparation in terms of music interpretation is so important,” Asher said. — AFP