

## Face to face with the Blockade

- **Interview with 13-year-old Raysel Rojas, recipient of an international award on the environment. He was not able to receive his prize.**

**By ELSON CONCEPCION**

The 13-year-old Cuban boy Raysel Sosa Rojas won a United Nations award but could never receive its prize because it had US components.

**Raysel talks about the painting that won him the prize.**

Surrounded by his grandmother —his mother was at work— other relatives and friends, Raysel answered questions from this *Granma* reporter on the balcony of his apartment in the Havana district of San Agustin.

Raysel spoke about the love he feels for painting, the international award he won, and the camera he never received because it had US components, forbidden under the US government's blockade on Cuba. While, in his presence, other prize-winning children from Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America received their cameras. He did not.

**How did you hear that you had won the prize?**

One day I was sleeping there (he points to his bedroom) and early in the morning the phone rang. My mother was already leaving for work, and as we never get calls that early she was surprised. It was my teacher who was calling to tell us the news, that I had received the award for Latin America and the Caribbean, from the International Children's Contest sponsored by the United Nations Environment Program.

**Where was the awarding ceremony?**

In Algeria. There were children from Yugoslavia, Thailand, and Ecuador. There was also another from Africa, one from Japan and I.

**And the award?**

It was a Nikon camera. It was not given to me. I was told that since I am Cuban I could not receive it.

**How did you feel when faced with such discrimination?**

I was very sad when I saw that everybody else received their prize and I didn't.

**What's your opinion about this measure?**

The blockade causes all sorts of problems. Even children are affected. I could never imagine that such measure could be used against young people who paint to protect the environment. I couldn't believe it could go that far.

**What did your family have to say about the prize you never got?**

My family was sad and still is because that is not supposed to happen to children. I hope that one day the blockade disappears and that the US stops murdering families around the world. I have seen how the US Army attacks and destroys houses where children live. How they demolish houses, how they kill pregnant women.

**As a Cuban, do you feel you are lacking anything?**

No, I have everything here. In the polyclinics I receive good healthcare services and free of charge. The same goes for the hospitals. That doesn't happen in many other countries, where an operation can cost a fortune. [Rayse]He suffers from haemophilia, a difficulty with blood coagulation].

**And what is the treatment you receive for your illness?**

I have received all the vaccinations free of charge. Last year, I had to be hospitalized in the intensive care unit of the Juan Manuel Fajardo Pediatric hospital. I received everything I needed, all free. The same applies to school. To go to school here does not cost a cent, however, they impose a blockade on us.

**Where did your desire to paint come from?**

Our art teacher, Jorge, started a community workshop. I saw that lots of children were attending. I talked to him, he gave me several tests, and then I became involved with the workshop that was called "Coloring my Neighborhood."

**How did you create the painting that won you the award?**

Thinking. I put my imagination on drawing paper.

My painting shows that before, everything was more beautiful. It talks about the protection of nature. When there was no pollution, the environment was better protected. Trees were not destroyed and animals were not killed.

**What do you want to study?**

I want to be a painter. When I complete my studies at the Olof Palme High School, I want to enroll at the San Alejandro painting and sculpture school

(Sent to the Collaboration October 2006 by our friend Ines Fors, (former) First Secretary, Cuba Interests Section, Washington, DC, as an example of how the US Embargo towards Cuba works.)