Entrepreneur Mayra Planas and her family immigrated to Detroit (via Miami) from Havana, Cuba in 2001 as refugees. Although Mayra left her family and roots in both Guantanamo and Havana, Cuba, she has not left behind her Cuban culture, food, and customs. In fact, Mayra has been sharing her own unique twist on Cuban cuisine with Detroiters since 2014. After graduating from ProsperUS Detroit entrepreneurship training in fall 2018 and winning $10,000 in ProsperUS’s 2019 competition, Mayra is only months away from opening up her own food truck dubbed “Havana on Wheelz.”

Long before adding finishing touches on her food truck, Mayra’s entrepreneurship journey was borne out of struggle. In December 2014 Mayra began selling her pulled pork Cuban sandwiches to co-workers as a side hustle. Not only was Mayra earning some extra cash, but she also was also filling the large void of Cuban cuisine in Detroit. Mayra and her husband, who hails from Puerto Rico, discovered that there weren’t any Caribbean, nevertheless Cuban restaurants in Detroit, and decided this was the perfect opportunity to share new flavors with Detroiters. Mayra found immediate success in selling her sandwiches to her family’s coworkers and quickly started cooking in her mother-in-law’s kitchen to serve new customers, including workers at the ford and MOBIS factories. What began as a side-hustle was quickly growing, so Mayra decided to attend ProsperUS’s 20-week entrepreneurship program to help her upscale her business after a fellow ProsperUS graduate referred her to the program.

While working full-time as a medical assistant in a school-based clinic, Mayra attended ProsperUS training classes and continued to sell her sandwiches, smoothies, and sides on the weekend. Balancing two young children, a home, job, and her own business, is certainly challenging, she said. Her customers feedback is what continues to drive her forward, though, explaining that “Every time someone tells me my meat tastes awesome, I know that it’s worth it to cook the meat the day of and it’s worth marinating the meat 3 days before. It is worth it to give excellence in my business. When people say, “I’ve never tried this, what do you put in it?” it elevates me and makes me want to keep on doing this.” Not only is Mayra motivated by her customers, but also by her desire to dictate her own schedule and be at home to raise her two young children herself. She explained, “When things go slow or when at the beginning it’s hard [to run a business] and you want to quit … I think about my kids and how this will give me the freedom to be at home with my kids.”

Mayra’s hard work ethic and passion for Cuban cuisine was quickly noticed by the ProsperUS community, and especially by her trainer Monica Casarez. Monica challenged Mayra to grapple with business concepts in English, her second language. Mayra explained, “the way Monica [and other instructors] trust us and believe in us, that’s amazing, sometimes you just have to believe in people, and that is what they have done with me, they believe this Cuban girl can get in there and do big things.” While Mayra’s Cuban background is very central to her identity and her business, she is determined to showcase many cultures in her food. She said, “I am Cuban and super proud of being Cuban, but at the same time I’m from Southwest Detroit and have so many cultures around me. I want to show that to people, I want to show it to anyone who will try it.” We have a feeling that many people will not only be touched by Mayra’s food but also inspired by her story. Mayra constantly encourages other Detroiters to launch and work at their own business, saying “Even if you only earn $2 back from the sales just don’t give up, keep on doing it. The sky’s the limit.” Mayra hopes that other Detroiters join ProsperUS Detroit’s community: “You can see [ProsperUS] is making a difference in our community because we are a small [business], I am Hispanic, I am a minority, I don’t have the resources to go to business school, I don’t have the time to do all of these things, and ProsperUS gives me that opportunity.”