



At 8 a.m.
on July 27,
2017

Armando Menocal, 76, strolled up to a sidewalk table looking like he always does:

cool and in a good mood. He was in Salt Lake City for an outdoor-industry trade show. His smile showed off a sizeable gap between his front teeth. Armando wore an African-print shirt and gray shorts. An Exum Mountain Guides' visor shaded big sunglasses.

By Jeff Jackson

CLAUDIA LOPEZ

You may not know Armando Menocal, but when you clip a bolt or climb on public lands you can thank him for it.

The Savior

It had been a few years since I'd seen Armando. He had the same strong legs and nice tan, but there were Band-Aids on his arms. He'd been having trouble with his heart, he said, noting the irony that a mountaineer and cross-country ski racer who'd always depended on his heart and lungs was now struggling with his ticker. He was on blood thinners and his skin was "getting old."

Roughly from 1986 to 1993 Menocal was one of the founders and de facto leader of the nascent Access Fund.

It is hard to imagine where climbing would be today without Armando. He fought for climbers' rights, and though he wasn't a fan of bolts he believed the government shouldn't dictate how or where climbers place them. When government agencies tried to ban bolts, Armando stood in their way. When trad climbers rallied against sport climbers, Armando stood in the middle. Without him we might not have sport climbing. Without sport climbing we might never have had gyms. Without Armando you might have to go to Europe or Mexico or Canada to clip bolts. Rifle. The New. The Red. And a thousand other sport crags might not exist.

I told Armando that I was interested in this pivotal time when climbing hung in the balance, but he started at the beginning, telling me about his mother, Dolores Granda Menocal, and father, Armando Menocal, and growing up in Miami, Florida, as a third generation Cuban-American. His great, great grandfather came to the United States to escape the 10-year (1870 to 1880) Cuban war for independence from Spain, he explained.

"Cuba lost that one," Armando said in his rich story-telling voice, "and that was the first Cuban immigration to the United States. A huge number of Cubans came into Key West, started the tobacco industry there, and that's when my great grandparents came."

He said that a cousin of his great grandmother was the president of Cuba from 1912 to 1920 and that the president, Mario Garcia-Menocal, was once the subject of an H. L. Mencken story wherein Mencken claimed not to know whether Garcia-Menocal was "more famous for his prodigious drinking or stealing from the public purse."

This quote tickled Armando, who laughs easily and it took a little while for him to recover himself, but he finally stopped giggling and spoke of his three boys Matt, Marshall and Diego and his work in the 1980s as a civil-rights lawyer in San Francisco where, in *Larry P. vs. Riles*, he challenged the use

of the IQ test in California schools. He believed the tests were discriminatory, and he won but it took 20 years.

"IQ tests are still used," he said, "but not in California."

Then he talked about the summer he climbed every dome in Tuolumne, how he'd never climbed a 5.12, considered himself a trad climber and yet somehow became a defender of bolts and sport climbing. While we discussed the fundamental rights of climbers Armando engaged in some gentle table pounding.

In April 1990, Menocal had just turned 49. He was at the height of his legal career, the lawyer who wins the big cases, an erstwhile law professor at Stanford, a ski racer in the winter, run-out 5.10 climber in Tuolumne all summer, and "kind of a swashbuckler, and fun," says Maria Cranor, then the marketing director at the newly formed Black Diamond Equipment, as well as a member of the fledgling Access Fund.

American rock climbing was experiencing an earthquake of a magnitude it hadn't felt before or since. The traditional way to climb was to start on the ground and climb to the top. Sport climbers wanted to start at the top and go down. It all seems so simple and innocent from the vantage of 27 years,

"In the mid '80s climbing areas were getting closed, and because I was a public-interest lawyer, people would call," Armando says. "The people in charge didn't know what to do. Land managers were freaking out."

but what Armando calls the "Old Guard" didn't like it.

"The underlying driver of the sturm und drang that sucked us all in during the late '80s, early '90s was a cultural clash between climbing generations," says Cranor. "Lyera! Bolts! Comps! Frenchmen! It was all too much for the father figures of climbing, who seemed to have lost their gravitas and influence overnight."

On the "trad" side there were name-calling, chopped bolts, John Wayne references, derogatory bumper stickers such as "Sport Climbing is Neither," fistfights, ruined friendships.

To be fair, some sport climbers—a new name to distinguish the new sort of climber—were vain. They dieted. They wore really tight Lyera. But they did do some very hard and bold rock climbs. Climbs that were miles harder than anything the Old Guard had ever climbed.

By 1990 top-down bolting had impacted the world outside the factionist minutiae of climbing style and dogma, too. Entire crags were equipped in days, and sport climbers brought their power tools and mullets to National Forest Service and Park Service lands, county parks, and city parks all over America.

That's when Armando started getting phone calls.

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Recognizing the brewing threat, in 1985 the American Alpine Club president Bob Craig asked Armando to start an Access Committee. At first there were only two members, Jim Angell and Armando. Later a mainly volunteer crew of go-getters including John Juraschek, Randy Vogel, Sam Davidson, Mike Jimmerson, Rick Accomazzo, Mike Clifford, Alan Rubin, and Maria Cranor brought tactics Armando had picked up while he was at law school at George Washington University from 1964 to 1966, a place where he was "fully radicalized."

Armando used his abilities as a lawyer to keep clients in a piece-of-shit apartment that was their home, even though they had not paid rent. He fought so they could keep the car they needed to get to work even though they couldn't make payments. He got blacks or women on police forces even though they hadn't passed the physi-

cal or mental tests. "Some would say this is wrong," says Armando, "but [I believe] there are a higher set of values."

"Armando was intense," says Brady Robinson, the current executive director of the Access Fund. "He has mellowed out in the last 10 years. Armando is a softie and an incredible humanitarian, but the power he wielded in the world as an attorney was that of a fighter, so when confronted with challenges and obstacles, he tended to fight in the way he knew how."

At around the same time [1988 and 1989], the district Forest Service ranger in the Superstitions outside of Phoenix, Arizona, wrote an order that prohibited bolting after a Sierra Club photographer complained about having too many climbers in his photos. The district ranger there decided that bolts were a violation of the 1972 Wilderness Act, declaring them "abandoned personal property" and "permanent structures."

After getting wind of this closure, the Forest Service appointed a task force to look into the matter in the Superstitions and make recommendations, and while they were at it, come up with a bolting policy for all Forest Service lands. Since policy tends to be shared on all federal lands, there was a chance the National Parks would adopt whatever rules the Forest Service approved. If the Forest Service followed the district ranger's recommendation, bolts would be illegal on all the crags on Forest Service lands and potentially all federal lands, a bolt ban that could have included the entire High Sierra, the Cascades, Sawtooths, all of Yosemite including El Capitan, all of Joshua Tree, the New River Gorge, Red River Gorge, City of Rocks, and Shelf Road.

Suddenly there was both an internal squabble among climbers over the ethics of bolts and a far-reaching bureaucratic agency making policy about bolting. The consequences of an agency-wide ban on bolting could have been existential—routes couldn't be maintained, anchors would rust and rot. As Armando pointed out, "Once they banned bolts, the debate would move onto removal."

Oddly, some prominent climbers were actually hoping that the Feds would move in and regulate ethics by prohibiting rappel bolting. But Armando and the Access Committee made it their policy to defend every climber's right "to decide where and when to use whatever climbing techniques they deemed proper," Armando says. "Our policy was that no Park or Forest administrator could second-guess a climber's call that a bolt is needed for



American Alpine Club annual dinner, San Diego, 1990. This was the evening that the Access Committee split off to become the Access Fund. Paul Diffenderfer is seated far left, Armando Menocal is seated second from right. Randy Vogel is standing third from right. Sam Davidson is second from right; John Juraschek is far right.

protection or anchor."

Among those who disagreed with the Access Committee's vigorous support of sport climbing was a faction of the American Alpine Club, including future club president Jed Williamson and treasurer Bill Putnam.

"Bolting for sport climbing changed everything," says Williamson. "I didn't like it because 1) it defaced the walls and 2) it meant risk went down—no consequences if you fell. My deal was this: go to the bottom of the cliff, try to see if you could see a line, try to climb it, and if you met an impasse, down-climb."

This ground-up versus top-down ethical impasse led to squabbles within the club and long debates over how to approach access issues.

"They [the Alpine Club] were asking us, 'Why are you going to talk to these people in Arizona? This is a little local issue,'" Armando says. "Almost as if we were making it a bigger issue than it was. But if bolts had ever been declared illegal ... Just look at the history of mountain biking." [Bikes were banned from wilderness areas in 1984 and they're still banned.]

In December 1989, the disagreement within the Alpine Club over how to proceed became untenable and the Access Committee voted to secede. Armando's response was to start the Access Fund, a non-profit fund with less than \$50,000 in seed money from donations made to the Access Committee.

Not all climbers liked the Access Fund. Almost immediately its largest corporate

sponsor stopped donating. Prominent alpinist Chris Jones penned the article, "Who Needs the Access Fund?"

"I had climbing partners who disagreed," says Armando, "but few rude or threatening encounters. I think I had more bad scenes with pro-bolting folks, who objected to anything short of take-no-prisoners. Some wanted to demonize all opponents, as they thought they were being demonized."

Armando says the early meetings of the Access Fund "were hell." They debated whether they were an access or conservation organization, and just what access they would advocate for. Would they fight for closed areas? Were they going to defend climbers who climbed in closed areas? They received requests from climbers who wanted help bolting highway overpasses and artificial structures. Each issue had to be discussed.

During those early days the Access Fund was hand-to-mouth. It didn't have an office. Everyone worked at home and everyone paid for their own travel. Payroll was for two people, Armando worked for free, and the Access Fund was "over budget on day one," says Armando. Randy Vogel, Sam Davidson and John Juraschek joined Armando in the work. "No one ever said don't do it, we can't afford it," says Armando.

"We survived not just because of passion and luck," says Armando, "but because of the outdoor industry, which supported us with money almost from the beginning. They recognized that if we succeeded, they had a better chance to succeed."

After a letter-writing campaign that mainly included two Arizona locals, John “Dief” Diefenderfer and Michael Jimmerson, and Armando, and after meetings and disagreements with the government and conservation groups and wrangling and politicking, the 1989 Forest Service task force recommended that bolts be allowed on Forest Service lands. It was a precedent and a huge victory for climbers, but the Forest Service failed to take up the recommendations, and the bolting issue remained unresolved only to flare up again and again like coals on a windy night. Armando and the Access Fund, by then in partnership with the American Alpine Club and other outdoor-industry groups, put out those fires, too.

“Had it not been for Armando’s tenacious leadership, dogged perseverance and visionary understanding of the evolving sport,” says former president of Black Diamond Peter Metcalf, “we most likely would not have the vibrant and rich climbing scene that we have today.”

Today, Williamson says that Armando was right to create the Access Fund. “I was opposed at the time, but have come to appreciate his correct analysis. Wish ‘we’ [the AAC] had supported it wholeheartedly back then.”

From its modest beginnings the Access Fund grew year after year and now has a staff of 27, a \$2.5-million annual operating budget and has paid for the acquisition and preservation of 68 climbing areas. “We currently support 117 local climbing organizations and played a crucial role in the formation of many of them,” says Brady Robinson. “When you include our policy support, the work of the LCOs and our acquisitions and loan work, we have saved and conserved thousands of areas since 1991. We have honestly lost track!”

In November of 1998 Armando was in Havana sitting in the lobby of the Havana Libre (known as the Havana Hilton before Fidel Castro took over) having a Hatuey beer when a group of four attractive women approached. The one nearest Armando, Laura Rodríguez, asked, “Can we sit here?” (In Cuba, locals can’t sit in hotels or restaurants unless they are the guests of tourists.)

Armando had come to Cuba on a solo mission to see the country of his ancestry and connect with a place he had visited frequently as a boy. Sometimes his parents would let him go alone on the short flight between Miami to Havana into the arms of his relatives to whom he was known as El Americanito.

Castro took power in 1959, and then there was the failed CIA-sponsored Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961. Soon after, the United States made it a crime to travel to Cuba and Armando didn’t go back for 40 years.

Then he read something in his Lonely Planet guidebook about a World Heritage site, a Cuban valley called Viñales described as a “miniature Yosemite,” and he decided to check out the island’s climbing potential. He got around the travel ban by flying in and out of Mexico.

Hot with first-ascent fervor he was stoked to explore but then, out of nowhere, there were these four beautiful Cuban ladies asking to be his guests. By the end of that evening he decided that his exploration could be delayed for three days. After those three days Armando invited Laura to come with him to Viñales, but she couldn’t go.

Viñales really was a dreamy place with 1,000-foot overhanging, tufa-laced limestone walls. “Would it be possible to climb this unique architecture,” Armando wrote in a *Rock and Ice* article soon after his first trip, “through roofs, link alcoves, reach bigger and higher grottos, and in this way climb these overhanging caverns?”

Armando hired a local farmer to cut a trail to the most prominent wall, a towering shield of golden limestone. The next February,

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Armando was back with Craig Luebben, a prominent rope-gun, and the then *Rock and Ice* publisher George Bracksieck, to put up routes and promote climbing.

At the government-sponsored Sport City complex in Cuba, Luebben gave a slide show about how to climb ice to a room full of people who had never seen anything frozen outside the cubes in their mojitos. After the show, the team produced a duffle full of old climbing shoes and harnesses and handed them out. People responded, and out of that trip modern Cuban rock climbing was born.

As the years passed, Armando started coming to Cuba for Laura as much as the climbing. In 1999 he spent all of February, April and October in Cuba. And then he started spending all fall and spring in Cuba with Laura in Viñales, only heading back to his home in Jackson, Wyoming, for winter skiing and summer guiding.

Every visit he’d invite more people and add routes and soon there was a little community of local climbers. Guys like Anibal Fernandez and Carlos Pinelo who started climbing with Armando, and then added new and harder routes of their own.

Both Fernandez and Pinelo had only climbed on limestone when they received a grant in 2001 to complete guide training in Jackson with Exum Mountain Guides. The trip outside Cuba was thanks to Armando, who arranged the travel, raised funds, met with pooh-bahs and basically made it all happen, according to Dave Ryan, an old climbing buddy of Armando’s and one of the guides who trained Fernandez and Pinelo in their 10-day course.

In the fall of 2005 Armando was standing in line waiting to enter Havana, holding a bag with a new dress, shoes and a purse—gifts for Laura for their wedding day. Everything was ready. The wedding planned. Laura had been overseeing the construction of their house in Viñales.

But then a Cuban official “pulled me out of line,” Armando says, “and told me I was inadmissible. I told the guy my fiancée was waiting.” But they put Armando in a room in the dark and made him wait all night.

“In the morning they got my bags, took my passport and walked me to my seat on the flight back to Cancun.”

Armando tried again and again, but three times he was turned back in Havana. Twice he was stopped in Miami. In Cuba, Laura demanded to see Fidel Castro. “Usually the only Cubans who ask to see Fidel are kooks,” says Armando. “Laura had never



Summit of Triconi Nail via *Cerebus* (5.8), Needles of South Dakota, in 1994. Menocal on top, Sam Davidson below. UPPER RIGHT: First ascent of *Flyn’ Hyena* in Cuba’s Viñales Valley, 1999. The route remains the longest in Cuba, on most spectacular wall. Craig Luebben bolted the route, then gifted it to Menocal. LOWER RIGHT: Glacier Bay, Alaska, 2009.



done anything like that in her life.”

Laura didn’t get to see Castro but one of his secretaries. Then she met with the Office of the Communist Party Immigration Official, and was told that whatever Armando had done (they refused to tell her what), he had served his sentence and that he was now free to return. But when he tried to fly to Cuba, officials turned him around again.

“I was a foreigner spending a lot of time in Cuba, in the company of mostly Cubans, and the government was nervous,” says Armando. “I knew I was being watched. Unfortunately right about then I started keeping records on climbs for a guidebook. I had all these notes and drawings and on my rest days I would go wander all over. I had a mountain bike with a computer to measure distance and stuff. I was all over the valley, and everybody knew that.”

The year before, in 2004, a couple of concerning things had happened. Anibal was busted for a small amount of marijuana and the authorities questioned him for three and a half days about Armando.

“They had photocopies of my climbing

notes,” says Armando. “They had photos of me out scouting the valley.”

The cops showed Anibal pictures of Armando riding a mountain bike. “What is he doing?” they asked.

Anibal didn’t know what to say. “He’s riding a bike.”

Then one night at the home of Oscar Jaime, the unofficial basecamp for climbers, Armando and Oscar drank a little too much rum and Oscar told him about the time he was invited to a party at a fancy hotel and how all of a sudden everybody disappeared and Oscar was standing with the Viñales chief of security, just the two of them.

The chief says, “Look, I’ve got a job I want you to do. We know Armando has a transistor radio and we want to know what he uses it for, so tomorrow when he goes out climbing I want you to bring it to us and we’ll give it back to you at the end of the day.”

Oscar didn’t know what to do. Then he remembered the transistor radio that Lynn Hill had given him after her climbing trip earlier that year.

“So that’s what he did,” Armando says.

“Thank god Lynn didn’t have anything illegal inside her radio, or I would have been arrested! But you know, I didn’t have anything to hide. I wasn’t doing anything wrong.”

There are three “big” things in which the Cuban government takes pride: the education system, the health-care system and sports.

“Sports are controlled one hundred percent by the government,” says Armando. “It’s based on the East German model and here was this sport that had developed organically. And Cubans are being supported by foreigners—worse, an American. They don’t like sports that are created and run by outsiders. But as you and I know, climbing isn’t run by anybody. I’m no saint, but I tend to think that [my being banned] was because of their hostility to a sport that was independent.”

Recognizing that he might never be allowed back in Cuba, Armando decided to get Laura out of Cuba. After five years he succeeded, and the two finally were married in Coral Gables, Florida in 2010, the day after she came to the United States.



Menocal the attorney tackled civil-rights cases. MIDDLE: Menocal (far right) with Gary Lane headed up to Half Dome in 1974, as Menocal's son Matt examines the rope. RIGHT: Home at last. Menocal with his wife Laura at their home in Viñales, in 2017.

Laura and Armando never stopped trying to get back to their home in Viñales. Years passed but in the interim Armando stayed active—climbing, nordic skiing and mountain biking with his two Siberian huskies Paprika and Wasabi, and taking on local issues like standing up for open-trail access and lobbying to get the jingus bolts on Blacktail Butte in Grand Teton National Park replaced.

He could also be found, “at least a couple of days a week holding court with the regulars at the brewpub—club mug #14, the one with the Cuban flag on it,” according to Dave Ryan.

In addition to the local activism, Armando had the inklings of something bigger.

“After I was declared inadmissible and saw that the Cuban climbers weren’t even allowed to organize a club, I started to think about trying to start an international access organization,” he says.

He settled on Latin America because of the common language and spent two years, from 2007 to 2009, raising funds and talking to sponsors. In August 2009, climbing advocates from the United States, Spain, Canada, and all over Latin America met in Squamish at a mountain-film festival. Three days later Acceso PanAm was formed.

“I had a little bit of money left over and I hired Kika Bradford, a Brazilian, to be the executive director,” says Armando.

In an e-mail, Bradford wrote: “Soon after the Squamish meeting, we engaged in the fight to protect Cochamó, an incredible alpine valley in Chile, which was threatened by a hydroelectric plant. Cochamó is still under several private landowners’ hands and not 100 percent protected, but the cam-

paign we ran in 2009 and 2010 was enough to stop the plant and secure a wild atmosphere for the area.”

Today, Acceso PanAm is training activists, hiring regional directors, building grassroots chapters and alliances with other conservation organizations, working on waste-management projects in Patagonia, and printing a climbing-management manual in Portuguese. In Brazil alone Acceso PanAm’s activism has led “to the securing or improvement of access to climbing areas in at least five national parks, five state parks, and many city parks,” according to Bradford.

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In January 2016 Armando and Laura Menocal were allowed back in Cuba. Armando doesn’t know why, but guesses that when the Cuban bureaucracy transferred its paper records to computers they simply lost him in the shuffle.

Armando and Laura now spend about half of their time at their home in Viñales and the other half in Jackson. During some back-and-forth to fill in the blanks for this story, Armando sent me the most incredible sunset photo from Viñales. “Another bluebird day in paradise,” he wrote. “Moments like these I thank climbing for bringing me to these places.”

Armando doesn’t climb much anymore, but keeping climbing unregulated and as free as can be remain, after decades of work, priorities. He is active as the president of Acceso PanAm and fundraises for the same. He is also an advocate for Cuban climbing, running the website cubaclimbing.com, where he provides vital information on the ever-changing access issues and encourages visitors to bring much-needed gear and bolts with them.

“Climbing may be in my blood, but not climbing due to age is awkward,” says Armando. “Mostly I sit on my porch looking out at the royal palms and the limestone walls of Viñales and write about climbing.”

Across from the home that Armando continues to work on, in the verdant valley of Viñales, a particular wall stands out. The Cubans call it Vista de Armando—Armando’s view.

Jeff Jackson is Editor at Large for Rock and Ice.