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'We're Not Going To Go Away'

Three from NMSU say fight for social justice is in their blood

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LAS CRUCES — Former New Mexico State University assistant professor Yelena Bird was born into a family of diplomats and lawyers.

Her husband, John Moraros, watched a student uprising lead to the overthrow of a military dictator in his native Greece.

Graduate student Freedom Cheteni has fought the odds from the day he was born three months premature to a mother fleeing tribal genocide in Zimbabwe.

Today, the three are better known for the battle they're waging against NMSU. But they each say that if not for their backgrounds, they might not have been willing to put themselves on the front lines in what they call a quest for social justice.

Moraros and Bird have been let go from their positions as junior faculty members at NMSU. University officials have given no reason for not renewing their contracts, but the married couple allege it was because they spoke out against racism and sexual harassment. NMSU is also questioning their graduate degrees.

"We're not going to go away quietly into the gentle night," said Moraros, a tall, balding man with wire-framed glasses who now spends much of his time compiling documents and building his case against the university.

On one side are Moraros, Bird and Cheteni, and on the other are former NMSU President Michael Martin, his administration and regents president Bob Gallagher. Martin — a well-respected but quick-tempered man — likened a protest over the matter last spring to a "sewing circle," a remark for which he later apologized. Martin has gone on to become chancellor at Louisiana State University.

But the battle rages on.

Moraros and Bird fought back after their contracts weren't renewed.

They have taken their case to anyone who will listen — national, state and local media; the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission; the American Association of University Professors; the American Civil Liberties Union; and the U.S. Department of Education. They have retained attorneys, as has Cheteni.

Complaints they've filed with federal and state agencies accuse their superiors at the university's College of Health and Social Services of retaliation, sexual harassment and racism. Bird and Cheteni are black. Moraros is Greek and Mexican. They also accused an associate dean in the college of sending unwanted sexually explicit e-mails on the university computer system.

Cheteni has backed the couple, filing complaints himself charging that he was exposed to the pornographic e-mails from then-associate dean Larry Olsen, who is no longer working at NMSU.

The top leadership at the college and in the Health Science Department have stepped down or been removed since the dispute began. The university has repeatedly contended that the moves weren't caused by the Moraros and Bird complaints.

Cheteni, who lacks three classes to complete his master's of public health degree, has seen his tuition quadruple and has also lost his graduate assistantship. NMSU says it is now charging Cheteni out-of-state tuition because it cannot verify he is seeking political asylum in the United States.

'It made me strong'

Bird's thick Caribbean accent hints at her unique upbringing, a world traveler raised by her paternal grandparents in England, the West Indies and Europe. Born in Hendon, a London suburb, in 1965, Bird recalls her grandfather the Honorable Vere Cornwall Bird Sr.'s struggle to lead his country of Antigua and Barbuda to independence from Great Britain.

Vere Bird was selected by his country's people as the British colony's premier. She watched his struggle pay off in November 1981 when he became the first prime minister of Antigua and Barbuda, sister islands in the Caribbean populated by around 80,000 people.

"(I was) used to being around powerful people, but also knowing what actually is taking place ..." said Bird, who, along with husband Moraros, became a U.S. citizen in 1993.

High price of freedom

Moraros was born in Athens, Greece, in 1964 to a community activist mother and a businessman determined to teach his son to work hard and question everything.

Among his most vivid memories is watching on TV as a group of university students took over and shut down the Polytechnic Institute in hopes of drawing the attention of the international press. He was 9.

Though universities in Greece tended to be sanctuaries off-limits to police and the military, the dictator in power, Georgios Papadopoulos, panicked and a tank was sent to break through the university's walls. Twenty-four civilians were killed, incensing the public and leading to the overthrow of Papadopoulos.

"I was very upset about what happened to those kids," Moraros said. Three decades later, his mother's words still echo in his memory.

"She said, 'Well, these are the sacrifices you need to make sometimes in life in order to get freedom. Freedom comes with a very high price. These are the sacrifices that people need to make in order to advocate for social justice,'" Moraros recalled.

His father left Greece for the United States and started a chain of successful Greek coffee shops. When Moraros arrived in New York, he expected a cushy lifestyle in light of his father's success. Instead, his father put him to work washing dishes the same night he stepped off his airplane. It was a rude awakening.

Friends introduced Moraros and Bird, who was then living in New York. In fall 1984, the 20-year-old fair-skinned Greek married the 19-year-old cultured black woman. Their families were less than thrilled, and Bird and Moraros, used to having what they wanted, suddenly found themselves working multiple jobs just to support themselves.

They eventually earned their medical degrees from the Instituto de Ciencias Biomédicas in Ciudad

Juárez. Today, both unemployed, they and their 13-year-old son, Christian, live off their savings.

"I think it would be hypocritical of us if for all these years we'd be teaching our students to be advocates of justice and reform ... and then for us when our moment of truth came to just fold, to just quietly go away into the gentle night," Moraros said. "You have to stand up for what you believe in life."

No coward

The lives of privilege enjoyed by Bird and Moraros were foreign to Cheteni, now 25, who was born and raised in the troubled African country of Zimbabwe.

Though he wasn't even expected to survive because he was born prematurely, Cheteni beat the odds and was later hand-picked to attend Kutama College, one of the country's elite high schools where he rubbed elbows with president Robert Mugabe's son and other students being groomed to be the nation's leaders.

He won no favor by speaking out against Mugabe's land allocation policy, which stripped land from whites in the country. Cheteni caught the attention of the U.S. embassy, however, and was offered a chance to attend college in the United States. He graduated from Colorado College in 2006 and has applied for political asylum.

Toy cars and a race horse clutter the Las Cruces home Cheteni shares with his spirited 2-year-old son and partner. As he watches his son play at a park a short hike from his home, Cheteni, arms folded across his chest, talks about the situation that has played out at NMSU over the last year.

"I think just leaving NMSU because of this is just being a coward," he said. "I think we need to be able to face the situation and come up with a solution. That's what life is about."

Serving others

Cheteni has already earned a master's degree in biology from NMSU and after completing his master's of public health, he plans to get a professional degree in economic development from NMSU. He plans to go to medical school in the Netherlands next year.

Eventually, Cheteni said, he'd like to return to Zimbabwe — when it's stable, when the current political regime is no longer there. When that day comes, Cheteni said he wants to be able to help his people.

Moraros and Bird said they picked NMSU for similar reasons. They had always been interested in medicine and decided they wanted to combine medicine and public health, partly because it would allow them to help more people. They chose NMSU because they wanted to study the Hispanic population along the U.S./Mexico border.

"We felt that medicine was a noble profession compared to politics and law," said Moraros, whose research had been celebrated in university publications up until his battle with NMSU began.

For now, Moraros, Bird and Cheteni are all vowing to stay put in Las Cruces until their cases are resolved.

Key developments

August 2007: New Mexico State University assistant professors Yelena Bird and John Moraros, in a letter to a Department of Health Science official, accuse some of their superiors of discriminatory behavior and one of sending inappropriate e-mails.

December 2007: The couple files a grievance with the dean of the College of Health and Social

Services alleging racial and sexual harassment.

Feb. 13, 2008: Bird and Moraros are told their contracts aren't being renewed. NMSU gives no reason. Later that month, the couple try to appeal their terminations to the university appeals committee, but the department chair denies their request.

Feb. 28, 2008: NMSU Graduate Student Freedom Cheteni files a complaint with NMSU's Office of Institutional Equity complaining that he was exposed to pornographic e-mails sent by then-associate dean Larry Olsen. He also alleges racial discrimination.

March 12, 2008: The Journal requests comment from NMSU about allegations Olsen sent pornographic e-mails to Moraros and others. NMSU announces Olsen is temporarily stepping down.

Late March: Moraros and Bird contact the American Association of University Professors asking for help.

April 14, 2008: Moraros, Bird and others receive menacing letters in their NMSU offices. The letters contain racial epithets and tell them to be quiet or suffer the consequences. NMSU Police takes the lead in the investigation, though those who received letters contact the FBI for help.

May : Moraros and Bird file a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission alleging retaliation, sexual harassment, racial discrimination, intimidation and hostile work environment. The complaint is pending.

June: Cheteni files a complaint with the EEOC alleging retaliation, sexual harassment and discrimination.

June 11, 2008: NMSU issues a statement announcing major changes at the College of Health and Social Services. Olsen has lost his tenured faculty position, and other top officials have stepped down or been reassigned.

July 2, 2008: Then-President Michael Martin approaches professor Robert Buckingham, informing him that he believes Moraros and Bird have engaged in plagiarism. He cites similarities in the methodology section of their theses. Buckingham contends Martin threatens to release a "three-inch file of dirt" on him if he doesn't back the charges. Martin admits meeting with Buckingham but denies threatening him.

July 14, 2008 : Six years after Moraros and Bird were admitted to NMSU, the university sends them a letter saying documentation on their medical degrees from the Instituto de Ciencias Biomédicas in Ciudad Juárez is incomplete and if other documents aren't submitted, their doctorates in molecular biology could be yanked. NMSU also threatens to rescind their admissions into the master of social work program.

July 28, 2008: The Juárez university sends NMSU letters stating that Moraros and Bird were awarded medical doctorate diplomas in June 2002 and that its records show confirmation of the degrees was submitted to NMSU in 2002. NMSU spokesman Darrell Pehr said that as soon as NMSU gets transcripts for Moraros and Bird, the matter will be closed. He said five NMSU graduates and several others currently enrolled were found to have incomplete files and were asked to provide further documentation.

Aug 2, 2008: A probe of the documents apparently goes to the highest levels. Letters from the Juárez university are addressed to NMSU Interim President Waded Cruzado, indicating she was in contact with the school about Moraros and Bird. Pehr said, "These are administrative procedures that are carried out by the appropriate departments, so the president would have no personal role in this process."

August 2008: Moraros and Bird contact the U.S. Department of Education alleging violations of their educational privacy rights. An official complaint has yet to be filed.

Summer 2008: Cheteni is informed that his tuition has jumped from \$1,800 to nearly \$7,600. Cheteni has paid in-state tuition for the last three semesters he's been at NMSU. He also learns that his graduate assistant job is no longer available. NMSU attorney Bruce Kite said in-state tuition was initially granted in 2007 because Cheteni presented proof he was seeking political asylum. But when he enrolled for a professional degree in economic development in the spring, he reported being at NMSU on an F1 visa, and students on F1 visas are charged out-of-state tuition, Kite said. NMSU has asked for a copy of Cheteni's application for political asylum, a document that by federal law is deemed confidential. Cheteni contends he's always been an F1 student and that his application for political asylum is pending, a claim verified by a Homeland Security card valid until July 10, 2009. The card lists his category as C08, the code used for those with pending applications.

Aug. 8, 2008 : NMSU contends that Cheteni no longer qualifies for a graduate assistant position at the College of Health and Social Services because he has transferred his graduate major to a doctoral program in the College of Business. Cheteni, who needs only three classes to complete his public health master's degree, said he's enrolled in both programs.

Aug. 20, 2008 : Moraros and Bird are informed that their admission into the master of social work program is denied because of inconsistencies in the documents received from the Juárez university. A letter states that there is substantial question about whether they obtained their MD degrees.

Sources: Interviews, NMSU documents and Journal archives



MORAROS: Saw Greek dictator overthrown

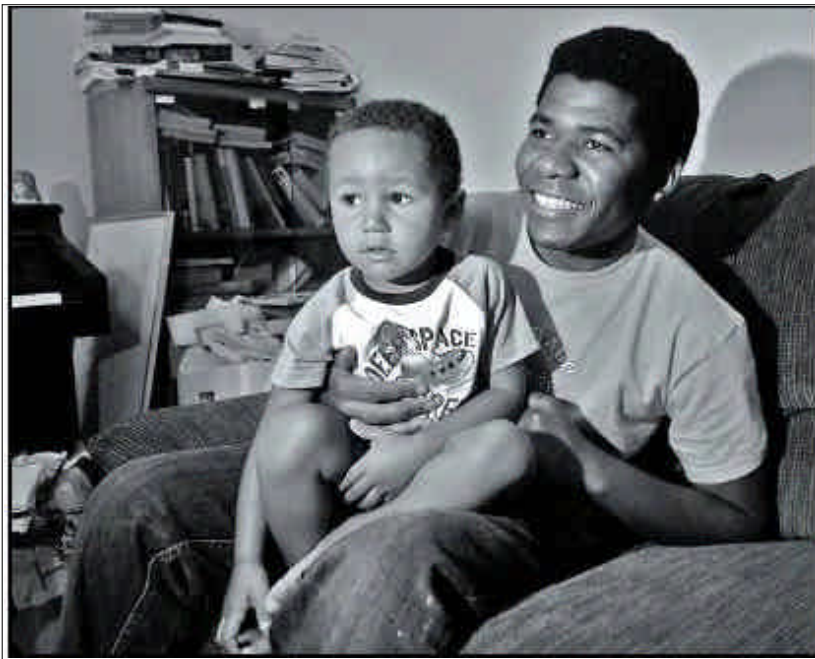


BIRD: Granddaughter of Caribbean leader





RICHARD PIPES/JOURNAL Ousted NMSU professors John Moraros and Yelena Bird say they were let go because they spoke out against racism and sexual harassment in their college.



NMSU graduate student Freedom Cheteni holds his 2-year-old son, Patrick Simbarashe, in his Las Cruces home. Cheteni's tuition quadrupled after he backed allegations made by two ousted professors.