

Out of the Sha dows

By Wendell LaGrand

Cuban dissident lawyer finally free to accept ABA award

In 1997 the ABA Section of Litigation wanted to present its International Human Rights Award to Cuban dissident lawyer Leonel Morejon Almagro. There was just one problem: He was in a Cuban jail.

But now, after a four-year odyssey, Morejon is finally at liberty to accept the section's award recognizing the work that caused him to be deported by the government of Fidel Castro.

Morejon received the award in August during the ABA Annual Meeting in Chicago. (Another Cuban dissident lawyer, Rene Gomez Manzano, co-recipient of the second award, was also jailed and unable to accept the award. According to news reports, he is still in Cuba.)

Having endured harassment, assault and imprisonment, Morejon, who founded a group seeking to establish a democratic government in Cuba, was finally pressured into leaving in October 1999.

The United States granted Morejon political asylum. With the help of the U.S. Catholic Conference, he and his wife and daughter were relocated to Lansing, Michigan, where his son was born.

In Lansing, Morejon disappeared into obscurity. Unable to practice law, he worked in an auto parts factory until the company went bankrupt and then worked as a dishwasher. Now he cleans floors at a Value City store.

One winter day, Morejon met Keith Christopher Fudge, a fellow resident in his apartment building who happens to be a student at Thomas M. Cooley Law School.

"When I came in that day, Keith asked me if I was coming from a party," says Morejon, who spoke through an interpreter in a recent interview with the *ABA Journal*. "I thought that was funny. Even though I was tired, I answered that I was coming home from work.

"Then he asked if I was going to sleep. I told him, 'No, I'm going to shower and go to school.'" That intrigued Fudge, who asked what Morejon was studying.

"I told him I was an attorney, and I wanted to practice in the United States." Morejon says, "He looked at me like he did not believe me. I told him, 'Wait a second, I'm going to show you something that's in English.'"

Morejon brought out a letter from Barry F. McNeil of Dallas,

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the 1997 Litigation Section chair, notifying Morejon of his award.

"I was just blown away," says Fudge. "As soon as I read the letter I correlated his name with the ABA letterhead, and my jaw dropped."

Then Fudge called the ABA and learned that the section had been trying to locate Morejon since 1997.

"He went underground for years," says Ronald J. Cohen of Phoenix, current section chair. "He carried that letter from 1997 until someone translated it. We never heard from him, but now we know the rest of the story. What a joy it is to express our gratitude to him for his incredible courage."

"I am proud to receive this important award," Morejon says. "It is important to note that I received the award while I worked in Cuba." Above all, it is an important stimulus to understanding the dissidents in Cuba and also the attorneys working patiently on human rights in Cuba."

Morejon earned a law degree in Cuba and worked as a lawyer until he was dismissed because of his defense of political prisoners in court. Between December 1995 and February 1996, he was arrested nine times for his continued demands for democracy and freedom.

Morejon is the founder of Concilio Cubano, an organization of more than 100 groups, including Corriente Agramontista, a lawyers' group pursuing increased independence of the judicial system and establishment of the rule of law in Cuba.

Concilio Cubano has made efforts to shed light on the internal situation in Cuba. Morejon says, "Before the Cuban Council, nobody really knew how bad it was."

Concilio Cuban's goal is to promote a peaceful transition to a democratic constitutional state and to establish a legal framework to guarantee observance of universally accepted



human rights. In 1996 the group nominated Morejon for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Fudge is attempting to nominate him again. "He never received the nomination certificates," Fudge says, "so he might have the opportunity to actually win this time."

Morejon has not given up on the possibility of returning to Cuba. "We have long strides to make," says Morejon about his country and its current government. "The Cuban people can create a very beautiful society, an open pluralistic society." The government must, however, "make a new social pact with all Cubans," he says.

His immediate plans include getting a legal education in the United States. But that involves starting at the beginning again, even though he was a practicing lawyer in Cuba. He can't stop working either. "Almost the whole time I've been here, I have been working in a factory," Morejon says.

"The most important thing at this moment is to improve my English. If you want to make a good lawyer, a good professional, you need to know what you want to do. My first step was to make good friends like Keith and David," he says, referring to David Machado, his interpreter and a judicial law clerk whose parents are both dissidents from Cuba.

Morejon says he thinks he can make a good lawyer in this country. "I am trying to familiarize myself with the law in order to attain a law degree," he says. "I hope to go to a good law school."