

ISLAS' intention with this section, "Profiles," is to introduce our readers to the life, work, ideas and perspectives regarding Cuba today, and to the future of outstanding African descendants on the island. These black men and women are involved in politics, culture, civic activism, and religion.

Yaremis Flores Marín

Leonardo Calvo Cárdenas

Historian and political scientist

Vice President, *Progressive Arc Party* (PARP)

Vice Coordinator, *Citizens' Committee for Racial Integration* (CIR)

ISLAS representative in Cuba

Havana, Cuba



Yaremis and her husband Veizant Boley, also an independent attorney

Those repressors who serve the perpetual crime that insists on calling itself a revolution, who are blinded by their *machismo*, panic and arrogance, never imagined how much tested strength, conviction and valor they would find hidden behind

the beauty, sweetness and honesty of a young woman, mother and attorney.

Her family members and the feeling world were put on pins and needles when Yaremis Flores was arbitrarily arrested and accused of an alleged crime while carrying

out her duty by talking about her nation's reality. The young jurist, very much committed to justice, was premeditatedly taken down the very same path of terror and derision that has broken and subjected so many men and women throughout the sad history of the crimes against dignity that have casted their shadow upon the image of Cuban leaders. Once again, the machinery of human destruction was set into motion. Yet Yaremis, who never lost her tenderness or composure, showed the well-known criminals that faith, true love of one's brethren, justice and, above all, honestly and sincerely embraced convictions have much more power than their well known, very powerful, unscrupulous indolence.

Yaremis Flores graduated with a law degree from the University of Havana in 2006. She fulfilled her mandatory social service as a Penal Judge, and also distinguished herself as an Enforcement Judge, President of the Penal Crimes' Section for Summary Processing, and President of the Territorial Section for Economic Crime at the Municipal Court of San Miguel del Padrón. Even though many of her colleagues opted for easier, more lucrative and corrupt work that is eating away at the Cuban judicial system, Yaremis and her colleagues decided to uphold their commitment to truth, justice and the law, even though they ran all the risks that this behavior implies in Cuba.

For a year, Yaremis worked in the NGO Cuban Juridical Association (AJC) and is currently working as a specialist at the Legal Information Center (CUBALEX), an independent institution that offers citizens legal counseling and special legal help—all free of charge. Yaremis and her CUBALEX colleagues offer documented information and handle accusations regarding the law and the violation of citizens' rights for international

agencies that promote and protect human rights.

She works as an independent journalist for various media outlets, prominent among them the digital newspaper *Cubanet.org*, the portal *Diario de Cuba* (Madrid), the weekly *Primavera de Cuba*, the journal *Misceláneas de Cuba* and two blogs, *Jurisconsulto de Cuba* and *Cubalex*.

Her daily behavior and integrity in facing the Cuban authorities' penchant for repression have made her an admirable reference and example of Cuban women who today have a distinguished place in the struggle for the democracy and justice of which we have fervently dreamt.

On a daily basis, this young, professional, African descendant professional and mother, in her extreme defense of truth and justice, something she does with incredible naturalness, tenderness and conviction, confronts obstacles and challenges that serve only to strengthen her commitment and faith. She has been kind enough to share with our journal's readers her experiences and ideas about topics that are very important for Cuba's present and future.

Leonardo Calvo: Why did you choose law as a way to channel your vocation and humanistic sensibility?

Yaremis Flores: I chose it because I wanted to be altruistic and work for justice, and experience pride in studying at the University of Havana. Although I was interested in journalism, law was my first choice. I never even thought twice about it. When I was barely 17 years old, I did not realize that this chosen career would be so difficult in our country. When I began to study the constitution and compare it with others, I realized that it contained many limitations on citizens' freedoms and a permanent intention to on the part

of our leaders to stay in power. I graduated in 2006 and had to do my social service as a judge. At the beginning, I really didn't want to do that, since I had no vocation for it. Later on, I got passionate about it and thought that in doing that I'd be able to do my small bit for what was right—and do it right. Yet, in reality, judges are not independent in Cuba: you absolutely must do what your superiors tell you to do, which is generally not in keeping with the law. I don't like when anyone tells me what to do, even less if it goes against my principals. If I had to define in one word that experience, the word would be DECEPTION. Thus, I began to work with independent attorneys, before I left the judicial system. Currently, as an independent lawyer, I feel much more fulfilled and think I'm doing important work, directly with people, whether they are dissidents or not.

LC: How can the practice of independent law—which is not acknowledged by the Cuban government—contribute to alleviating the current state of vulnerability and injustice that citizens must endure?

YF: As an independent attorney, I cannot defend or represent anyone at any proceeding, because the law itself prohibits it. Only lawyers who belong to the National Organization of Collective Law Offices can defend citizens. Because I am a defender of human rights who openly criticizes and expresses her opinion, I will never be admitted to any State law office. Nevertheless, I do help people from my position by teaching them about their rights and offering them the tools they need to demand them. I write complaints for people to present to the authorities or analyze sentences to try to get penal cases reconsidered. Many citizens do not demand their rights because they don't know the ways in which even their attorneys can work against them. In addition, if they

cannot resolve their situation within the system, there is always the possibility of presenting their cases to international agencies like the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and other special, United Nations' offices, which state lawyers do not do.

LC: What challenges does the construction of a future, democratic Cuba face, obstacles like a customary lack of respect for the law and rights on the part of the State, the overwhelming lack of a legal culture imposed by five decades of totalitarianism, and the general corruption that plagues our legal system today?

YF: Due to my experience, in the long term we inevitably need for a separation of powers, to facilitate the creation of a democratic system of justice. We need a court that can annul laws that contradict the Constitution, and for an independent agency to control and investigate cases of corruption among judges and prosecutors. Nowadays, the police do not accept accusations against a particular judge. Much less do they research them: everything proceeds according to what the court itself decides. In the short term, we must educate people and even jurists about human rights. Through lawsuits and appeals, it is also important to show the jurists from State organizations all the legal basics that they violate both at the national and international level.

LC: You've just endured the difficult experience of arbitrary arrest and being threatened with being tried. Briefly describe this to our readers and explain how this event influences your commitment and determination to promote the law and justice.

YF: Arbitrary detention is very common on our island. It became my turn to have that experience on November 7th, 2012. The process of investigation against me is only one

more example that proves that there is no freedom of expression here. It is also a punishment, because at the Center for Legal Information where I work, one of our jobs is to send messages to the Working Group on Arbitrary Arrest, so it can examine these arrests. Put simply, the only explanation for what happened to me is arbitrariness. They can do nothing else because I am not a criminal. Both the good and bad things that happen to me make me stronger. This is not easy, but it is not impossible. The three days I spent at the Center for Penal Instruction of the Department of Technical Investigations (DTT), also known as 100 and Aldabó, really helped me understand the methods with which they try to disband dissidents and manipulate families. It also sensitized me a lot: now, when a mother whose son is in jail or when a prisoner calls me on the phone to review his sentence, my attitude is quite different.

LC: What do you think needs to be done about the race problem in Cuba today?

YF: The topic of race in Cuba is complicated. Black people deny their race. I am a black woman, mother and dissident. I am proud of that. When I was a child, my father taught me to be proud of my color. I was able to study at the Lenin High School, where almost all the students were white and from economically comfortable families. My father warned me that because I was black I could not just be average: I had to be the best. Racial discrimination in my country is very subtle. It is very hard to prove that if someone gets fired from his or her job, that it was due to racial discrimination. No Cuban court can work with or investigate allegations by victims of racial discrimination.

Even though there is not supposed to be any discrimination, I have never seen the image of a black baby on a jar of baby food made in Cuba. I have never been able to buy my daughter a black doll. Last January 6th, on Three Kings Day, I went to almost all the stores and found only dolls with blue eyes. Is that our only model of beauty? All I know is that if one visits a marginalized neighborhood, there are more blacks than whites living there. One needs no statistics to see that there are more blacks than whites in our prisons. There is definitely unequal opportunity.

LC: What measures should be taken to efficiently challenge the race problem in Cuba with some modicum of success?

YF: The media and educational systems have a lot of influence over society. In Cuba, television and schools are under State control, and we are unable to counter the racial stereotypes they impose upon us. The first step in challenging the race problem would be to talk to children about black pride, all the way from childhood up. We should talk to them about anonymous heroes and heroines in our history, which should be the responsibility of parents. Of course, the greatest responsibility lies with the State, which should resolve the reasons why blacks are in many ways favored less, and punished through denigrating acts due to their race. Those who defend human rights and equality should document cases in which racial discrimination may be the motive and report them to the rapporteur for racial discrimination, the Working Group of Experts on African Descendants, and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.