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Bulgarian bartender falls in love with the law

‘I needed a challenge. I needed something to nourish my soul’

By Jan Pudlow

Senior Editor

As soon as new lawyers take the “Oath of Attorney,” the tradition is to crowd onto the steps of the Florida Supreme Court for a group picture with the justices.

After the professional photographer packs up and leaves, proud families and friends whip out their digital cameras for their own keepsake shots.

It was here, on the courthouse steps on a sunny Tallahassee afternoon, that Pavlina Petrova came to stand next to Chief Justice Barbara Pariente for a picture of just the two of them.

“This is a very special day for me,” Petrova told the chief justice. “It took me nine and a half years to come to these steps. I had to learn the English alphabet. I am from Bulgaria.”

Squeezing her hand and congratulating her, Pariente told Petrova that America needs more people like her, with that kind of determination.

Two days later, Petrova was back on the job as an assistant public defender in the Sixth Judicial Circuit’s Clearwater office, representing defendants charged with misdemeanors.

“Some of my clients have never heard of Bulgaria,” Petrova said. “When I introduce myself in the very beginning, I tell my clients, ‘Even though I have a strong accent, don’t worry. My enthusiasm and dedication will compensate.’”

Quoting a poem “We Are the Hope,” displayed on Sixth Circuit Public Defender Bob Dillinger’s Web page, Petrova says: “What we the public defenders do for our clients, we really are the hope. It’s great satisfaction to me, even though I haven’t been long here, to see hope in my clients’ eyes. It’s something that money cannot buy.”

Petrova knows all about losing hope and finding it again.

She told the story of how it came to be that a single mom from once-communist Bulgaria landed in Florida in 1995 without her high school diploma, but with a passion to become a lawyer no matter what it took.

“I needed a challenge. I needed something to nourish my soul,” Petrova said. “I wanted a profession which, to me, would be a long-term challenge for the rest of my life.”

The American-Bulgarian connection began when her young daughter, Ekaterina Atanassova, was in the fourth grade and a visiting teacher from America taught her class for two months and finally made learning fun.

The next year, Ekaterina came to America as a visiting student, and Petrova came to see her three times. When the school year was up, Ekaterina did not want to return to Bulgaria, where communist domination had ended only a few years earlier in 1990. The process of moving toward

a political democracy and market economy was slow and painful, as Bulgarians combated inflation, unemployment, corruption, and crime.

“First years of democracy were very difficult,” Petrova said. “Change cannot happen overnight. Change in people’s minds cannot happen in even one year.”

But big changes were in store for Petrova.

The divorced mother, who owned her own 24-hour bar she started from scratch, realized she had two choices: Stay alone in Bulgaria unhappily working at her bar, or go to America to be with her daughter.

Once in America, she dreamed of going to college and restarting her education.

“During communist time in Bulgaria, once you are 33 or older you cannot continue in a regular college. You are considered too old,” said 49-year-old Petrova. “So I say, I am going to the United States. My friends said, ‘What are you going to do? You won’t have money to buy bread for your child.’”

In the fall of 1995, Petrova landed in the St. Petersburg area, enrolled in a class to get her GED and to learn English. She was lucky to meet Jean Cook, her instructor of English for speakers of other languages, at Palm Harbor Community School.

“No. 1, I am extremely proud of Paula,” Cook says, using her former student’s American name. “I can safely say she is my highest achieving student. . . . When she walked into my class, she was pretty much a nonspeaker and didn’t understand much at all. It hasn’t been easy for her. She had to study and work very hard. I gave her as much support as I could.”

When friends who bought Petrova’s bar in Bulgaria refused to send her the \$20,000 sales price, Petrova felt betrayed by her so-called friends and distraught over how she could afford to go to school.

“I don’t have money to go to school and that is my dream. So about for six months, I didn’t see any light. Mrs. Cook, she knew about that. She started to give me more homework. She realized that I wouldn’t go unprepared, so I will spend most of my time doing homework and I wouldn’t have time to spend feeling sorry for myself. When you have a positive attitude, things fix themselves,” Petrova said.

So Petrova went to what was then called St. Petersburg Junior College, then on to Eckerd College for a bachelor’s degree in American Studies.

“She was a full-time waitress, a full-time mom, and a full-time student,” Cook said. “She is extremely bright. She is the type of person who asks questions in class that stump the teacher.”

Cook stuck with her, writing letters of recommendation and keeping the encouragement flowing.

Pulling a paper out of her former student’s thick file, Cook quoted an essay Petrova wrote about opportunities in America: “It doesn’t matter what gets in my way. Time will prove whether I am right or wrong.” It was about her dream to become an attorney within 10 years.

She was accepted at Florida State University College of Law at the same time her daughter was accepted at FSU to study finance.

“If in 10 years, I can start from nothing, not know the English language, not knowing anybody. If I can do that, anybody can do it—if they have the desire,” said Petrova, who hopes to become an American citizen in January.

For her graduation from law school, her daughter gave her a clock, with this message: “Where there is a will, there is a way.”

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