Exiled professor advocates equality, democracy

by James Hagg

KANSAS STATE COLLEGIAN

Not many people know what it's like to be accused of being a subversive agent and banished from their homeland, but until recently, Paraguayan sociologist Riquénu was. Riquénu's story is one of how the battle for democracy and equality can sometimes take a lifetime of struggle.

Born in Asunción, Paraguay, Riquénu witnessed the military coup that began the 35-year reign of authoritarian Alfredo Stroessner as president of Paraguay. After Stroessner was arrested in 1981, Riquénu fled to the United States, where he was given political asylum and went on to earn a doctorate in sociology from the University of California at Santa Barbara.

After his student visa expired, Riquénu, a naturalized citizen, was allowed entry in 1982. He began teaching at the University of Illinois, where he eventually became a professor. In 1991, Riquénu returned to Paraguay to teach at the Universidad de Paraguay.

Riquénu's work in Paraguay has been focused on issues of social justice and human rights. He has been a vocal critic of the government's policies, which he says are often oppressive and violate the rights of citizens. Riquénu's work has earned him international recognition, and he has received several awards for his contributions to the field of sociology.

Riquénu's story is a reminder of the power of education and how it can be used to bring about change. Despite the challenges he faced, Riquénu never gave up on his passion for teaching and research. His story is a testament to the importance of education in the struggle for equality and democracy.
RIQUELME | Associate professor researches social issues in Paraguay, state terrorism, Operation Condor

reeclassified," he said. Riquelme added about 260 documents were removed from the archives, and since then the file has been "Glomar Recovery" to many of his requests, which is an official statement that neither confirms nor denies the existence of the documents.

Frustrated with the lack of access and continued denial of Freedom of Information Act requests, Riquelme did what no other has ever done — he sued the world's largest intelligence agency.

All the work for the case is being done pro bono, or free of charge, by Richard Wilson of American University's Washington College of Law and a cohort of graduate students.

For all his hard work, so far his only reward is a mysterious increase in inspections and interrogations at U.S. airports, resulting in missed flights.

When not relentlessly pursuing government agencies, Riquelme continues his research. He currently is focusing on social issues in rural Paraguay and continuing his research on state terrorism and Operation Condor. In January, he will begin phase retirement, where he will teach one semester at K-State and one semester in Paraguay, which is home once again.

"I continue to be a citizen of that country," he said.

For those who work with him, Riquelme's experience and passion make him an indispensable asset.

"I think that he is a very important figure not only for the sociology department but for K-State," Daniel Aguilar, graduate student in sociology said.

Aguilar, originally from Colombia, said, Riquelme helped him with the information and application to come to K-State. He also said Riquelme's point of view, often different from many here in the heartland, has helped open dialogue.

"He's always open for a good discussion," Aguilar said. "That's good from an academic perspective and for the students."

Additionally, Aguilar said Riquelme's teaching style makes occasional difficult subjects accessible.

"(He can) explain it in a way that you say, 'Oh, now it makes sense,'" he said. "And that's special, not everybody has that."

Regardless of his location, Riquelme said he continues to champion the causes that funded him in a dictator's prison — equality, peace, the environment, democracy and Latin American integration.

"I was not a combatant. I was a progressive scholar, and I continue to be that way," he said.

After years of traveling and two decades of exile from his country, he said the idea of home has changed.

"The term home could be redefined," he said. "Because I was not allowed to go home — home was Paraguay."

And although he never studied there, he finally went to France.