Scientific freedom must be defended at all costs

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Ed Gerjuoy has been sending letters across the world for decades, hoping to free imprisoned scientists. Gerjuoy has sent them to China, to Russia and to Cuba. Success has been mixed.

"The Chinese seem impervious to public relations," he told me over a bowl of soup at the Smithfield Cafe. "The Russians were not."

Gerjuoy is 85, has more degrees than a thermometer, and yet never stops learning. These days, some of the things this physicist/lawyer is finding out he would have preferred not to know. It's now our government that gets letters from the Committee on the International Freedom of Scientists, of which he is vice chairman.

Call him old-fashioned, but Gerjuoy believes prisoners must have the ability to defend themselves and be treated in the manner of civilized nations. He's basically saying the same things he said to Soviet scientists on his visits behind the Iron Curtain in the 1970s: "What you want to do is be like the United States."

Meaning that in America, when you jail somebody, you need good reasons. If we don't hold our government to that, we'll have nothing left to hold.

I first met Gerjuoy three years ago when he was helping the legal team that freed Wen Ho Lee from a New Mexico prison. Prosecutors wound up being scolded by a federal judge for holding that scientist in prison for nine months without reasonable bail. U.S. District Court Judge James Parker accepted Lee's guilty plea to one count of mishandling sensitive weapons data, gave him credit for the time he'd already served, and set Lee free. The rest of the government's case -- made on Attorney General Janet Reno's watch, it should be remembered -- came to naught. So much for that threat to the nation.

Now the federal government is going after others. The case Gerjuoy and I discussed most was that of Branislav Djordjevic.

Djordjevic, 48, emigrated from Yugoslavia in 1991 and earned a doctorate in physics from Michigan State University. He has a wife and two small children who are American citizens. They all lived in a one-story house in a Northern Virginia suburb until Djordjevic was picked up two months ago for deportation. He has been jailed since.

His lawyer has described a bureaucratic mixup worthy of Kafka: Djordjevic was approved last year for a visa that would allow him and his wife to live and work here for up to six years, but a previous attorney never told Djordjevic his request for political asylum had been denied. That set legal machinery in motion, and the government picked Djordjevic up only after it was too late to appeal.
The committee for scientific freedom wrote a letter a month ago to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, saying, "As a breadwinner of the family, a homeowner, a caretaker of an ill family member and someone who has a job that he enjoys and has sought asylum in this country it appears that Dr. Djordjevic is anything but a flight risk. Thus we are surprised he has not been released on bond."

There are those who say that in the post-Sept. 11 world, we have to get used to stories like these. But Gerjuoy will never accept the idea that the United States can lower its standards.

When we speak of scientific freedom, this is not just idealism. It's pragmatism. There's a reason Djordjevic was granted a visa. This country needs physicists if it hopes to remain strong.

"We are not growing our own physicists," he says. "Physics is hard. It's a beautiful subject but it's hard."

Gerjuoy ticked off a short list of the items physicists have helped create since he earned his doctorate in 1942 and engaged in the sonar research that helped win World War II: magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), CAT scans and ultrasound tests.

"It's hard to realize how much of our modern life is dependent on physics."

It's harder still to remember how much is dependent on the wording and spirit of the U.S. Constitution. But a man from Point Breeze manages both.

Brian O'Neill can be reached at boneill@post-gazette.com or 412-263-1947.