

# Nicholas Askounes Ashford: Educator, Public Advocate, Musician

By Aphrodite Matsakis

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“My time on this earth might be limited,” says Nicholas Askounes Ashford, his voice brimming with gratitude, “but I feel like I live in several worlds at the same time – the world of science, of law, of economics, of music and of the cultures that are available to me because of my knowledge of several different languages: English, Greek, German, Dutch and some Italian as well.”

“And all these worlds matter to me,” he adds emphatically. Exceptionally meaningful to Ashford are the opportunities he has to combine his knowledge of these various worlds to help science and technology evolve in humane ways that help people and do not destroy the environment and endanger public health. With both a Ph.D. in chemistry and a law degree from the University of Chicago, as well as graduate training in economics, Ashford has become a leader and educator in the area of environmental policy and sustainable development on both a national and international level.

Ashford finds excitement in his multifaceted career, which he relishes with a Zorba-like enthusiasm. He is currently Professor of Technology and Policy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology where he teaches courses in Environmental Law, Policy, and Economics; Law, Technology and Public Policy; and Sustainability, Trade and Environment. He also holds adjunct faculty positions at the Harvard and Boston University Schools of Public Health. In addition, he teaches two intensive courses: one in Sustainable Development and another in European and International Environmental Law, not only at Cambridge University, UK, but at the Cyprus-Harvard Institute in Environmental Studies in Nicosia, Cyprus. This brings him much joy and a deep sense of satisfaction.

Cyprus is especially important to Ashford. His parents were founders and worked in the St. Louis Justice for Cyprus Committee. They also supported the Greek War Relief effort and assisted displaced persons after the Second World War.

In the early 1920s, at the age of 13, Nicholas' father, the late Dr. Theodore Askounes Ashford, emigrated from the village of Kastri, near Tripoli, to work with his father in the restaurants in Chicago. “My father's teachers in Kastri con-

sidered my father to be highly intelligent, but all my grandfather wanted was that my father becomes a good waiter. When my father was 15, my grandfather went back to Greece and left my father alone in the United States to fend for himself and to be the sole breadwinner for the family,” recalls Nicholas Ashford.

“My father worked in the restaurants and slept there in order to save money on rent so he could send more money to his family in Greece. In spite of these hard conditions, however, during his first 10 years in the U.S., my father managed to complete the YMCA high school in three years, college in three years and obtain a Ph.D. in chemistry from the University of Chicago. My father had no formal English classes, no mentor and no money, but he did have a mother who prized education, an attitude that distinguished most Greeks from other rural peoples and accounted for their amazing success in foreign lands.

“Because of both my father's personal odyssey and because of his Greek culture,” Nicholas emphasizes, “in our family there were no such words as ‘I can't do it.’ My father's insistence that nothing was impossible had a profound effect on all of us. My father also believed that if someone had a talent, that person owed it to society to develop that talent. Money and social status meant little to him. The same was true of my mother.”

Mrs. Venette Ashford, who was born in the village of Filiatra, is often called the Jane Addams of the Greeks. Nicholas Ashford notes that she helped over 5,000 Greeks emigrate to the United States. Together with her husband, she personally sponsored hundreds of immigrants. But she did more than that. “She found them jobs, encouraged them to go to school, helped them to obtain citizenship and convinced them to help each other,” writes Nicholas Ashford in his biographical account of his mother's life (in “Greek-American Pioneer Women of Illinois,” Elaine Thomopoulos, editor, Arcadia Publishing, Chicago, IL 2000). Dr. and Mrs. Ashford also adopted a Greek orphan, Maria Zabaka, who joined their family of three sons: Nicholas, Theodore and Robert.

Nicholas' Ashford's professional achievements clearly reflect his family's “can do” spirit and dedication to social justice. He holds to Jeffersonian ideals and that the government and the business community have an obligation to assume responsibility for society's



Dr. Nicholas Askounes Ashford, Professor of Technology and Policy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has become a leader and educator in the area of environmental policy and sustainable development. He is also an accomplished musician. His new textbook, “Environmental Law, Policy, and Economics: Reclaiming the Environmental Agenda,” is scheduled to be released by MIT Press.

moral fabric and economic condition and for the physical health and safety of its citizens. This philosophy finds expression in his numerous publications. To date, Ashford has published several hundred articles in peer-reviewed journals and law reviews and 10 books, many of which address the legal, scientific and public policy issues surrounding public health, the preservation of the environment, and protection and fair treatment of workers.

His new textbook, “Environmental Law, Policy, and Economics:

cerns, for example, is indoor air pollution and how even low levels of certain chemicals can have adverse health effects.

Ashford also authored a major work for the Ford Foundation, “Crisis in the Workplace: Occupational Disease” and co-authored four additional books: “Public Participation in Contaminated Communities,” “Chemical Exposures: Low Levels and High Stakes,” “Technology, Law and the Working Environment” and “Monitoring the Worker for Exposure and Disease.”

His research interests also reflect his concern for the humane and environmentally sensitive development of science and technology. Among his research interest are regulatory law and economics; the design of government policies for encouraging both technological innovation and improvements in health, safety and environmental quality; pollution prevention and cleaner/inherently safer production; the effects of liability in improving product and process safety; the consequences of low-level exposure to chemicals; sustainability; trade and environment; labor's participation in technological change; and environmental justice. He has developed methodologies for decision-making in the regulation of chemicals and has extensively investigated the effects of the regulation on technological innovation in the chemical, pharmaceutical and automobile industries. His research activities include work for the United Nations Environment Programme, the OECD, and the European Union, as well as for U.S. regulatory agencies and the U.S. Office of Technology Assessment.

In the popular mind, music and science are often viewed as being polar opposites. However research has shown that individuals with high interest and aptitudes in science can also have high musical interest and aptitudes as well. One reason for this may be that both music and science have an underlying sense of form and order. Since both music and science involve highly structured mental models, it should come as no surprise that musical and scientific abilities often go hand in hand. In college, Ashford was torn between becoming a scientist and a professional musician. He was such an excellent oboe player that he was nominated for the Rhodes Scholarship to attend Oxford. (He wonders if perhaps he was not chosen among the other nominees because the British

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Counsel in St. Louis, who was the judge of the Rhodes competition in the Midwest at the time, was familiar with and perhaps quite unhappy about the Ashford's family involvement in the Greek Cypriot cause). Nicholas' late brother, Theodore Askounes Ashford, had a double major in math and music, but went on to get a Ph.D. in music at Northwestern University where he subsequently served on the faculty. Theodore, who died at age 46, was a highly regarded jazz pianist, composer and the author of a book on music theory and composition. Nicholas played bass in his brother Theodore's jazz trio and with him played in a Greek band, the Greek Lads, which produced a lively LP of Greek dance music called "Dance, the Greek Lads." As a result of working as musicians throughout their high school, college and graduate school tenures, both brothers were financially independent of the family and contributed to easing the financial burdens on their parents, who worked at professions that were not well remunerated at that time.

"Because my name is Ashford, few know that I am Greek. But I am immensely proud to be Greek and wouldn't want to be anything else," says Nicholas. He continues, "It provides me with a cultural grounding and confidence to take

on problems others think are too difficult to address." But there are some aspects of "being Greek," he feels, which can be a double-edged sword: more specifically, the intensity of his temperament and his willingness to challenge the status quo. On the one hand, his intensity results in a "kefi" and "joie di vivre" that makes life beautiful and exciting, and his willingness to challenge the status quo for purposes of promoting economic justice and environmental sanity make his life profoundly meaningful. On the other hand, he finds that not all cultures, especially the Anglo-Saxon one, easily tolerate dialogues that involve strong emotions and challenging ideas.

"Confronting truth is different from confronting an individual; there's a difference between confronting someone about their ideas and being hostile towards them as a person or attacking their personally," explains Ashford. "But in this country, passionate dialogues where another person's ideas are challenged are often viewed as impolite and threatening. So sometimes, I have to bite my tongue."

Nicholas visits Greece often, for work and pleasure and has a summer home in Cape Sounion outside of Athens. When asked why he visits Greece so often, he laughs and says, "One reason is because in Greece, I'm not the loudest person in the restaurant. Zorba lives!"

Ashford is deeply involved in the United States-Greek Initiative for Technology Cooperation with the Balkans (the ITCB), serving as its co-chair. The ITCB was established in order to (1) promote economic stability, restore peace, and facilitate peaceful transition to free enterprise economies in the Balkan Region; (2) strengthen the friendship and understanding in the relationships among the U.S. and Greek private-sector firms and among private and public entities in the Balkan Region; (3) provide economic benefits to the Balkan Region, and (4) promote collaboration and cooperation among technology and industrial organizations, researchers and engineers for the benefit of the Balkan region. The ITCB has held several Balkan-focused workshops in Greece on technology assessment and transfer to promote its mission. While the ITCB does not apply its technology transfer programs to Greece, Nicholas has been a long-time observer of environmental conditions there. "Unfortunately," says Ashford, "Greece does not take European environmental law requirements as seriously as it might and much improvement is needed."

In the past, Ashford served as a public member and chairman of the National Advisory Committee on Occupational Safety and Health; served on the EPA Science

Advisory Board; was chairman of the Committee on Technology Innovation and Economics of the EPA National Advisory Council for Environmental Policy and Technology; and served as an advisor to the United Nations Environment Programme. Currently, he is a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and former chair of its Section on Societal Impacts of Science and Engineering. He is also legislation, regulation and policy editor of the Journal of Cleaner Production and serves on the editorial board of the Journal of Environmental Technology and Management. Visit <http://web.mit.edu/ctpid/www/tl/> for further information.

How can one man can be so professionally active in so many areas, yet still find time to enjoy life

Greek style - with music, visits to Greece, and heated political discussions (with emotional Greeks only)? The answer may lie in the spirit of Zorba. He, like Zorba, not only loves music and dance but also has an acute awareness of human suffering and injustices and works hard to make the world a better place for us to live.

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