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University of Miami professor teaches in the classroom — and in the sky

By Miraisy Rodriguez



Roni Avissar and graduate students Kelly Jackson and Kasey Cantwell, during that research flight to the Bahamas in the lead anecdote. Kelly Jackson shot the photo by holding out the camera in her left hand and snapping.

After Hurricane Irene ripped through the Bahamas in August, Kelly Jackson was stuck with a problem. The University of Miami doctoral student had to get to the islands for her research project, but had no way to go there.

So she turned to the only person at the University of Miami's Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science who could help her. That was Roni Avissar, the dean of the school and also a licensed helicopter pilot.

"He was great," Jackson said. "He was available right away, didn't charge anything for piloting the helicopter and helped find additional funding for the project."

Flying has been a life-long passion for Avissar, who is 58. He was born and grew up in France,

then moved to Israel when he was 17. He learned to fly helicopters while serving in the Israeli military.

"I had a life before academia," he said with a chuckle. "I was very young when I became fascinated with aviation."

Avissar, who lives in the Pinecrest area, has been dean at the Virginia Key school since 2009. He earned his bachelor's, master's and doctorate degrees at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. An atmospheric scientist, he came to the United States in 1986 to work at Colorado State University. From there he moved to Rutgers and then Duke University.

In 2005 while at Duke, Avissar used a specially outfitted Bell Jet Ranger to develop what he called a Helicopter Observation Platform (HOP) to research the interaction between the earth's surface and the atmosphere.

That's not all he did.

"I remember him bringing the helicopter to picnics on the engineering quad," said Lauren Lewis, a Duke engineering student at the time.

Now that he's at Rosenstiel, one of Avissar's priorities is to develop a similar HOP program. He has been raising funds since January to buy a new helicopter, which could cost as much as \$2.7 million, plus up to \$500,000 for special research equipment.

And whenever it arrives, he'll feel right at home at the controls. Nearly every weekend Avissar flies out of Bravo Helicopters at Tamiami Airport.

Avissar also flies fixed-wing aircraft, but prefers the feel of a helicopter.

"With a plane, you take off and you land," he said. "But, in a helicopter, you're always engaged."

In addition to research flights like Jackson's, the dean likes using his piloting skills to take visitors up for a birds-eye tour of Miami — including colleagues and associates of the university, said Avissar, who is also a certified flight instructor.

"I have begun teaching a couple faculty members and a trustee how to fly," said Avissar.

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