

Kirov Academy Ballet School Rehired "Sophia" Sookyeong Kim Sebold an Embezzler. Then \$1.5 Million Vanished.

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Kirov Academy of Ballet dancers performing in a recital in 2019. Credit...Josh Jeong/Kirov Academy of Ballet

The ex-employee is now charged with taking the money from the Kirov Academy, which was created by the Rev. Sun Myung Moon, founder of the Unification Church.

WASHINGTON -- In the summer of 2017, when one of the country's premier dance schools was looking to hire a comptroller, it just so happened that someone with experience in the role was looking for a job.



Sophia Kim, former comptroller for the Kirov Academy, after a hearing last month in Washington on her criminal case. Credit...Erin Scott for The New York Times

Sophia Kim had been the treasurer at the [Kirov Academy of Ballet](#) here two decades earlier, when the school was affiliated with the Unification Church of Rev. Sun Myung Moon.

But Ms. Kim also had a gambling habit and had recently spent almost two years in prison for embezzling \$800,000 from another nonprofit affiliated with the church.

So it was more than a bit surprising when the Kirov Academy, for reasons that remain tremendously opaque, hired Ms. Kim back, put her in charge of the books, gave her a Branch Banking and Trust debit card and access to the school's accounts.

"I wondered myself, 'Why would they rehire her?'" said Michael Beard, a former executive director of the school who retired in 2012. "I was completely shocked."

The consequences of that decision became clearer earlier this month when Ms. Kim appeared in court to face charges that, not long after she started working again at the academy, she misappropriated \$1.5 million from its coffers.

According to a Federal Bureau of Investigation affidavit, over a period of nine months in 2018, Ms. Kim wrote checks to herself and used her academy bank card 120 times to withdraw cash and pay off losses at the MGM Grand Casino in nearby Maryland.

"These losses really hurt us a lot," said Pamela Gonzales de Cordova, the executive director of the academy, who said the school was brought to the brink of bankruptcy.

Speaking by phone earlier this month, Ms. Kim said she would never do anything to hurt the academy, but said she could not discuss the case on the advice of her lawyer. "There is a lot more to it that is not out there," she said, "but this is not the right time, unfortunately."

Today the school reports it is independent of the Unification Church, though it is still led by one of Rev. Moon's daughters, who is the board president. And it is still recovering from one of the bigger embezzlement scandals in the history of ballet, one that demonstrates how matters relating to Moon's vast empire remain complicated and enigmatic even eight years after his death.



The Kirov Academy in Washington. Federal prosecutors say Ms. Kim misappropriated \$1.5 million from school accounts. Credit...Erin Scott for The New York Times

Although perhaps better known for its mass weddings, business ventures from real estate to media to commercial fishing, conservative politics, and the derisive term associated with its members -- Moonies -- the church has also long funded a number of nonprofits, some of which promote dance.

"It truly is a heavenly art form," Rev. Moon once said. "Ballet uses the entire body as an instrument to express man's aspiration towards God. In that sense it is the ultimate expression of artistic beauty."

His dance ventures included "The Little Angels" children's ensemble, the Seoul-based Universal Ballet and, in Washington, the Kirov Academy, which takes its name from the elite St. Petersburg troupe now known as the Mariinsky. (The Russian company and the school are friendly, and once shared an artistic director, but are not officially linked.)

Rev. Moon's interest in ballet grew in part out of his relationship with Julia Moon, a ballerina whom a critic once described as ["an elegant wisp of a dancer with a demure gaze and feathery technique."](#)



Julia Moon performing with the Universal Ballet in Chicago in 2000. Credit...Aynsley Floyd/Associated Press

Ms. Moon, then known as Hoon Sook Pak, was on tour with the Washington Ballet in 1984, preparing for the lead role in "Giselle," when Rev. Moon's 17-year-old son, Heung Jin, ran his car off the road. Having died single, he was not eligible to enter heaven under the church's teachings, so Ms. Moon agreed to marry the dead teen's spirit in a lavish ceremony in which she carried his portrait.

Later that year, Rev. Moon created the Universal Ballet company, where Ms. Moon, who took the family name, became the principal dancer. Six years later, he opened the Kirov Academy, converting a former monastery near Catholic University in Washington into a ballet paradise complete with a theater, dorms, classrooms and studios.

Among the school's first leaders was a ballet luminary, Oleg Vinogradov, then the director of the Kirov Ballet in Russia. At its peak more than a decade ago, the school turned out about a dozen high school graduates a year. Nearly all landed at top companies like American Ballet Theater and New York City Ballet.

The Unification Church initially bankrolled nearly all of the Kirov's budget, and Ms. Kim was hired to help as treasurer.

Ms. Kim, who is also known as Sookyeong Kim Sebold, joined the Unification Church at 19 in South Korea, she told the court during her first trial. Now 59, she came to the

United States in 1983 and married an American who served as a church lawyer.

After working for the Kirov, she was later hired by the Korean Cultural and Freedom Foundation, a nonprofit affiliated with the church that largely served to funnel its money and other donations to the Kirov, Little Angels and Universal Ballet.

But between 2001 and 2005, while she was working for the foundation, Ms. Kim often drove to Atlantic City to play Blackjack with its money, according to federal prosecutors in Virginia who charged her with filing a false tax return and tax evasion. The government said the investigation began because of discrepancies between the amount of money flowing through her personal accounts and what she had reported on her income tax returns.

Ms. Kim's lawyers said her efforts were not designed to benefit her personally. Rather, they argued, Ms. Kim, a devoted church member and divorced mother of three, was gambling and day trading in an effort to offset poor investments made by Ms. Moon's father, Bo Hi Pak, a church leader who ran the nonprofit and was a top aide to Rev. Moon.

"She thought she'd have a chance to raise additional revenue," Kevin Brehm, her lawyer, said at trial.

But the jury found her guilty and she was sentenced to two years in prison in 2013.

Unification Church leaders did not appear outraged by Ms. Kim's conduct. Mr. Pak, who ran the foundation from which Ms. Kim took the money, said he believed she was acting in its interest. He and his daughter, Ms. Moon, the general director of the Universal Ballet, which relied on funding from the nonprofit, wrote the court requesting leniency.

"This was a poor exercise of judgment," Ms. Moon wrote in her letter, "but I do not see her as a criminal."

By the time of Ms. Kim's release in January 2015, matters at the Unification Church and the Kirov Academy had changed. After Rev. Moon's death, in 2012, his wife and children and others in the church squabbled over who should succeed him, [divisions that continue to this day](#). Donations to the Kirov from the church diminished and the academy relied more and more on tuition fees to support what is now a nearly \$4 million operating budget.

But church members retained a role in the academy's operation. For example, in 2017, when Ms. Kim was rehired, Julia Moon was the school's president, chairwoman and artistic director. One of her brothers was executive director. The remaining five board members included her father and a Unification Church communications specialist.

The academy has declined to address why it took a chance on rehiring Ms. Kim despite her history. Ms. de Cordova, the current executive director, referred questions about Ms. Kim to the current president of the academy, Tatiana Moon, a daughter of Rev. Moon. Tatiana Moon declined to be interviewed. Julia Moon, who is based in South Korea and remains a member of the school's advisory board, could not be reached for comment



Rev. Moon and his wife preside over a mass wedding ceremony at Madison Square Garden in July 1982. Credit...Bettmann/Getty Images

In the latest case, the F.B.I. says Ms. Kim siphoned money from the school accounts in 2018, discrepancies that were discovered when Tatiana Moon was added to the school bank accounts. Before that, Ms. de Cordova said, Ms. Kim had been presenting the board with phony books. An outside accounting firm's analysis later found she had "misappropriated approximately \$1,501,283.13 from BB and T and SunTrust Bank accounts through unauthorized check, debit card and credit card transactions."

When Ms. de Cordova, a lawyer who was acting then as the school's interim executive director, heard about the missing money, she said she told the board it had to be reported to the authorities. With their assent, she went to the F.B.I. herself.

Ms. Kim, who has yet to plead in her case, was arrested in November at the MGM casino. She was released on Nov. 20 after promising to stay away from gambling establishments. But, actually, the government said in court papers, she has been back to the casino many times since her release.

Now, under the direction of Ms. de Cordova and Tatiana Moon, the Kirov is attempting to move forward. Ms. de Cordova, who is not a member of the Unification Church, said the church still provides some funding through an affiliated nonprofit, the Universal Cultural Foundation. The academy is soliciting corporate donations, in part to replace the lost money. Last year, the school successfully bought its school property -- valued at \$10 million -- from the Universal Cultural Foundation.

Ms. de Cordova said signs of progress by the academy are evident in its successes at the Youth America Grand Prix competition in New York last month. The academy and its students took home 15 prizes, including Best School and Best Choreography, from the new artistic director, Runquiao Du.

"I have resurrected this school from close to bankruptcy to winning 15 awards," Ms. de Cordova said. "I hate to use this phrase, but I want to make the Kirov great again."

Joshua Buursma contributed reporting from Washington