

The Mercury News

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Two longtime U.S. residents who can't share American dream with their wives tell their stories

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Mercury News

Article Launched: 07/06/2008 07:31:29 PM PDT

Most of the legal immigrants who aren't allowed to live in the United States with their spouses and children are relative newcomers who got married overseas and then found out that they needed to be citizens to bring their loved ones to this country.

Then there are the immigrants like Carlos Gonzales and Piero Giorgi.

Gonzales, a 26-year-old Salvadorean immigrant has been forced to move to Japan to keep his family together. Giorgi, a 47-year-old Italian immigrant, faces the agonizing choice of giving up a high-paying California job - and the American dream - or busting up his family for a few years.

Here are their stories:

They came fleeing war

Gonzales came to California as a 5-year-old boy when his parents fled the civil war in El Salvador. His mother was a professor, his father an accountant.

He grew up in Los Angeles, excelling in local schools. His father worked day and night as a security guard. Gonzales went on to attend Pasadena City College and California State University-

Northridge.

Then, at age 21, he did something that nearly got him kicked out of the country: He got married.

The problem was that his parents had made the mistake of waiting until Gonzales was 16 to apply for permanent residency. Then he got married a few months before his interview with immigration to become a legal permanent resident.

Gonzales had met his wife, Sayaka, a Japanese national, in 2001 while both were working for a company that provided services to children with autism and other special needs. She was here on a H-1B work visa. They married two years later.

When he went for the green-card interview, the immigration officer who handled his application could have denied him permanent residency because his marriage had put him in a different immigration category.

"The officer checked and re-checked with every supervisor in the building as to what could be done so I would not be denied my green card," he recalled. "I remember patiently waiting with tears in my eyes, asking myself why a small thing such as marriage could pretty much have gotten me deported."

The immigration officer came up with a solution: Separate his green-card application from his parents' application.

But his problems weren't over.

As soon as he got his green card, he immediately applied for a visa for his new wife. But, he said, immigration officials didn't process her paperwork in time, so she was forced to return to Japan to avoid further overstaying a temporary visa.

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The only way to see his wife was to visit her in Japan because, as the spouse of a green-card holder, she could not even visit the United States. During one of his trips, she became pregnant.

Then she developed medical complications and needed to stay in bed for the remainder of her pregnancy. So in 2004, Gonzales decided to leave a good-paying job and abandon his college studies. He took a job teaching English in Japan.

He returns to the United States twice a year to maintain his residency status. But "going back to the U.S. is always a scary and stressful time for me," he said. "I hold a Salvadorean passport and time after time I am discriminated at the airports because of my passport. Even upon entering the U.S., I am asked questions more than what the average traveler is asked.

"It makes me feel a bit angry, because deep inside I feel like I am an American. I may hold a different passport, but my loyalty and culture has been American since I came to the U.S.

"I know nothing else about El Salvador. The only connection I have to that country is a passport."

Gonzales and his 29-year-old wife hope eventually to join his parents in California, where they want to raise their two children: 3-year-old son Ryan and their newborn daughter, Karlah.

But Gonzales thinks it will take him five or six more years to become a citizen because he is being forced to spend so much time out of the United States.

"I have heard many stories online that people have been denied citizenship even after being in the U.S. for five years and having short trips," he said.

So he and his wife are staring at an uncertain

future.

Luck of the draw

Piero Giorgi's story is one of bad luck and good luck.

Born in Padova, Italy, near Venice, he married his hometown sweetheart in 1989.

In 1994, they moved to the Bay Area, where Giorgi worked as a software engineer on a contract basis for several firms, including Intel in Santa Clara. Two years later, his son, Giacomo, was born in Seton Medical Center in Daly City.

His last employer, Lawrence Livermore Laboratory, tried to sponsor him for a green card, but he and the lab missed an important deadline. So he had to return to Italy in 2001.

Luckily for Giorgi, two years later he won the annual immigration lottery that gives about 50,000 visas to people from countries with low rates of immigration. He and his wife, Manuela Zuin, were all packed on Jan. 3, 2004, and needed to get to the United States or lose their rights to the visas. Then their son, then 7, came down with pneumonia and was not able to travel. His wife had to stay behind and take care of her son.

She lost her right to immigrate.

"We tried to call the American consulate. We called congressmen. We called everybody we could think of. But we were told: 'Too bad. So sad. Her visa is expired. Period.' "

Giorgi came to the United States to establish his residency and applied for a re-entry visa. He returned to Italy for two years, the maximum time he was allowed to remain away from the United States

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and still keep his green card.

Then the Giorgi family got lucky again.

When Manuela was able to talk a consulate officer in Florence into giving her a tourist visa to visit her husband - a hard visa to get when your spouse is a green-card holder rather than a U.S. citizen. So they were able to move back to California.

They now live together in Roseville near Sacramento, where Giorgi is an IT director for a construction company.

But her tourist visa is only good for six months at a time, and she must now return to Italy.

Giacomo is beginning seventh grade in the fall, and they now must face the agonizing decision of whether to live apart next year. One likely scenario is to have their U.S-born son go live with her mother in Italy until Giorgi becomes a citizen and he can bring over his wife. But that wouldn't happen until 2010 - at the earliest.

Another option is to "just give up on this immigration idea," Giorgi said.

Giorgi says he deeply stands the need for immigration laws, but wishes "they weren't so convoluted."

"It's your house and you get to decide who comes in," he said. "But being a little fair would be nice, too."

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