

By Jaivime Evaristo

## Avoiding immigration limbo

**B**anks won't give a mortgage loan to someone who is only going to be in the country for 1 year," declared the real estate agent. His remark shocked me. I was a tenure-track faculty member at the time, but I was deemed unworthy to receive a line of credit because of my visa situation. I'm a citizen of the Philippines, and the visa that my U.S. institution obtained for me had to be renewed each year. So, on paper it looked as though I only had permission to be in the country for 1 year. My wife and I encountered many such hurdles because of my visa—and they ultimately drove me to quit my faculty position and leave the country.

In hindsight, I didn't take the visa application process seriously enough when I was negotiating my job offer. I was so excited about landing a tenure-track position that I didn't take time to think through what kind of visa and accommodations I would need to make my personal life work. I also assumed that the university had a system in place to deal with foreign hires. I said yes to the job offer and signed on the dotted line.

The first sign of trouble came when I tried to buy a house in our new city. I had moved there ahead of my wife and 1-year-old daughter so that I could look for a neighborhood where we could settle down. But as the real estate agent predicted, mortgage lenders didn't want to gamble on someone with a 1-year visa. I signed a lease for an apartment instead.

After my wife joined me, we needed a car because our sprawling community didn't have a strong public transportation system. But we had trouble securing credit for that, too. In the end, we had to put down more than \$3000 as a down payment.

The third, and final, straw came when my wife wanted to return to her work as a nurse after her maternity leave. Prior to our move, she had obtained a license to practice nursing in the United States. But she couldn't apply for jobs because of legal restrictions associated with my visa. That left her feeling frustrated and isolated, unable to establish a professional life in a new country.

Stress ran high in our small one-bedroom apartment. The logical fix to our problems was for me to secure permanent residency status, otherwise known as a green card. But that just brought more problems. I pleaded with my department chair, dean, and provost to support my green card application. But it took 6 months for the university



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government policy that grants a 30% tax exemption for foreign hires for a period of 5 years.

I'm glad we've ended up where we are. But when I look back, I wish that I'd been more prepared and proactive when negotiating my first faculty position. I could have asked the university to apply for a multiyear visa—which, I later learned, is what human resources staff had done for other faculty hires. I could have also requested a guarantee that the university would sponsor my application for permanent residency within a certain period of time and would pay for some immigration-related expenses, such as green card application fees.

I hope that other immigrant scientists take heed from my tale. If you land a job, don't sign on the dotted line until you know that you'll have what you need in your new country. ■

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