

Love Across Borders and Travel Bans: For the love of her and the love of the United States

By [Channing Downing Bice](#)

Posted Feb 17 2017 - 06:16pm

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**At the request of the interviewee, the subject in this article will be referred to as, "M."*

"This place is like heaven. If people bump into you or don't hold open the door, they say sorry," said M, a University of Wyoming student from Iran. "And now, these people are destroying this culture and country by their hands," he continued as he looked up from the table with tears in his eyes.

M's story has been over five years in the making after leaving Iran. His story includes three career changes, two different visa changes, an international student sanction, and the love of his life. In order to realize the impact, the controversial travel ban has on lives, it's important to tell M's story from the beginning.

Before departing for the U.S. from Iran, M and his fiancée had to make the difficult decision for him to leave Iran to start his program, while his fiancée stayed behind to finish her studies. Upon completing her studies, M's fiancée planned to join him in the United States.

"I came here and I started my program. After a while she would finish her studies back home, then she would join me. I would go back, get married and we would come back again," M explained.

The process of going to the United States was easier said than done. M explained the multiple hurdles involved in immigration processes.

"For me it took three months. For some other students it takes five months, six months, some it takes one year," M said. "As Iranians, we have just a single entry visa. Which is, at the time you get your visa, you have two months to enter the United States, and then it's done. You cannot leave United States unless you go back to an embassy and get another visa," he continued.

As if the application process to graduate programs wasn't hard enough on any student, regardless of residency, these applications and admissions become even more difficult for international students--especially Iranian students.

"Imagine I want to start my semester in the fall, I have to go to embassy previous spring semester. Before getting admission, you have to go to embassy. Once we get here, no one takes the risk to go back, not even to visit family," M explained.

After undergoing the visa application and vetting processes, M arrived in the United States in September 2011, in hopes of pursuing a PhD in an applied science field.

He was passing his classes and steadily pressing along in his degree in when in 2012, the United States put sanctions on students from Iran who were here or wanted to come here to study petroleum engineering. No one could get visas here anymore that were related to petroleum or the oil industry.

“In that case I was thinking, ‘how can I go back to see my fiancée?’ Then we decided to get married through proxy marriage.”

By going through a proxy marriage, it allowed for M and his fiancée at the time to be able to get legally married although they couldn’t physically be present with each other. The next obstacle after getting married, included a lengthy process of trying to get his new wife to the United States with him.

“After speaking with an immigration attorney they said, when you get married, she can apply for tourist visa at the embassy. The United States does not approve proxy marriages,” M explained.

One month after their marriage, she went to the Armenian embassy to apply for her tourist visa as their immigration attorney had advised. The officer working at the Armenian embassy seemed confused by the situation and asked M’s wife why she wasn’t applying for an F-2 dependent visa if her husband was in the U.S.

“She told the officer that she was applying for a tourist visa because the United States didn’t approve of proxy marriages and she wanted to be honest with them,” M recounted.

M’s wife went on in hopes of obtaining her tourist visa by making another attempt at the Armenian embassy and two more attempts at the Dubai embassy and got denied for her visa each time at the time of the interview.

When those attempts proved to be futile, she went on to the embassy in Turkey to apply for her visa for the third time. This attempt was different, because this time she was applying for her F2 visa. Again, M’s wife had no luck as she received another rejection in the administrative processes after two weeks in exchange for her relentless efforts to obtain a visa.

“It’s our life, but Iranians are all going through this-it’s because of the major,” M said. “It was because of my major, I couldn’t see my wife.

M found this out by talking to other friends he had made at the university who were also from Iran because they too, were going through similar things. At this point, M had already been in the petroleum department for months and passed several of his courses to obtain his PhD.

“At this time, I wanted to look at entrepreneurship culture and the lives of entrepreneurs in the United States. I had always been interested in entrepreneurship so I thought it might be a good time to take up entrepreneurship activities,” M said.

It was now 2013 by this time and M wanted to study various business leaders to gain more of a working knowledge of business practices. He studied Elon Musk, Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, and Warren Buffet. Additionally, M also studied Donald Trump.

“I watched all of ‘The Apprentice’ seasons, read his [Trump’s] books, and studied him for a case study,” he said. “When I was in the lab, I worked on engineering tasks and out of the lab--entrepreneurship studies became my life.”

In the midst of taking up entrepreneurship in his spare time, he began speaking with people affiliated with the College of Business, Ellbogen 30K Competition, and the Wyoming Technology Business Center on campus. Amongst the networking M had been doing with these organizations--an opportunity arose that could allow for M to pursue his passion and dream job that might also be the answer to he and his wife’s problems.

“[This organization] was hiring a business counselor which looked for a person that had a background in science or engineering that could be a link between [the organization] and international students at the university,” he explained. “That was 100% me.”

This position however, required a master's degree in some sort of STEM major and M was in his 4th year of obtaining his PhD. It was his dream to begin working in some form of business, working on building a startup. Getting that job also meant that he would be eligible to obtain an H1B visa that would classify him as an international worker, which would in turn make his credibility better.

"That job would allow me to get my H1B and would give my wife and myself a chance to make status stronger. When you have a student visa, as soon as you get your degree--you have no rights here," he said.

M went through with applying and interviewing for the position he qualified for after downgrading his PhD to his masters. After this process, M received good news.

"I was so happy when they said they really wanted me for the position," M said smiling.

M went through the process to make his F1 student visa a H1B international worker visa and got an American company to sponsor him. As long as he wasn't studying petroleum anymore but helping Americans create jobs, it put his wife in a better position to try to apply for an H4 visa which would classify her as the dependent of an international worker. He received his H1B visa in December 2016 and his wife applied for her visa, soon thereafter.

"She went to Cyprus embassy on December 27, 2016 and was accepted again. The officer said to her, 'everything is fine but as you know we have to do the screening process and we will let you know.'"

M and his wife waited for weeks until they received the news that they had waited years for--she was finally approved for her visa.

"We were happy until last Wednesday the 25th," M said on February 4. "We received the email that her visa is approved. She has to drop off her passport and her visa would be issued very soon--in two to three business days."

M immediately booked her flight to the United States because he knew based on the recent campaign promises and studying Trump's behavior as a businessman that he would follow through on those promises in the near future. What they didn't realize, was how near that future was going to be.

"I told my friends, 'when Trump gets elected, he will stop issuing visas for Iranians, I'm telling you.' My friends thought I was exaggerating," he explained.

His wife dropped off her passport on Friday, January 27, at the Cyprus embassy that had approved her visa which was Thursday night in the United States.

"The officer told her, 'yes, no worries we will get you your passport and visa in the next week. On Monday or Tuesday of the next week,'" he said. He paused and looked down at the table, looked back up at me and said, "The rest is history."

The following day in Wyoming, news outlets across the country reported the news that M and his wife had absolutely dreaded--an executive order barring refugees, immigrants, and citizens from seven Muslim majority countries had went into effect. One of the seven countries that barred travelers was Iran.

"I talked to my wife and said, honey, you'll have to stay there we have no choice," he said defeated. "We have to wait; we can't do anything right now. I expected this, but not in the first week."

This isn't M's first experience with a rapidly changing government. M grew up in a post democratic Iran. Before the revolution in Iran, there was a king in place of a democratically elected prime minister who was against a democratic system, however, he was still trying to advance the country. Soon thereafter, the Islamic revolution happened which dragged the kingdom down and also failed to establish a democratic system.

Based on M's upbringing, the events taking place in the United States are all too familiar to him.

“The most important thing, if you asked my mom, ‘when you were young, when you were a teenager, could you imagine that you had to wear a hijab and you had to follow Islamic rule where it is mandatory and enforced, would you?’ They would have said no, you’re crazy, it’s not going to happen,” M explained.

His parents explained him that their country with its rich, significant Persian history made it a better country.

“They could come and go whenever and wherever they want. Now just one generation later after that, and this is happening to me,” he said. “People in the United States think this is never going to happen, we will have democracy forever.”

This combined with the struggles that he and his wife had faced over the past several years pushed M to speak out-- on behalf of his love for her and the love of the country he now called home.

“Before this, I never talked much and now I want to talk to everyone because this is not just my personal problem, it is America’s problem,” he explained.

In the days to follow, M approached the president of the university’s office, called Senator Enzi’s office, and began to join the coalition of collecting signatures through a petition to speak with the president of the university’s office.

“They [M’s Iranian friends] said, ‘I can’t get my H1B...’ and I said in response, ‘It’s not about your H1B, his F-1, green cards, how we’re living--none of that. It’s about the United States of America,’” He explained to his friends. “These things are very small. Guys, we have to write this letter to tell American students and the university president to wake up. It’s our problem, but it’s your problem before it’s ours,” he continued.

M continued to explain the dangers of quick policy changes such as these. When things change this fast, they can also get destroyed this fast.

“I don’t know why people don’t believe it. You think this is my problem, my personal story? But this is your country,” He said to me.

If he were able to go back to Iran he would be excited to tell his people of his life experiences here.

“I would tell my people, ‘it was a good life, thank God. I lived in Iran, went to the United States. I saw and talked to different people, I learned different cultures, I saw nice things about humanity and thank God it was a good life,’” he said smiling.

When asked what M’s next steps were moving forward he continued to explain that he wants to continue educating others and contributing to humanity however he can.

“The tools of democracy work or they fail. If those tools fail, we all fail,” M advised in closing.

So what can students do moving forward for students like M? Call senators, talk to representatives and do what it takes to preserve the tools of democracy.

UPDATE: I am happy to report, after years of struggling to obtain her visa, M’s wife was able to get her visa when the executive order was blocked by federal judges. She was then able to catch a flight from Istanbul to the United States. Saturday night, February 11, 2017 after five trying years apart, M’s wife was finally in her husband’s arms.

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