

Dream stumbles on red tape

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Body

Lynda and Michael Arazie had a new car, a new house, and they were expecting an adopted baby to arrive in a few months.

But in early December, Lynda Arazie, 33, got a call that threatened to upend the life they were building.

Her work permit had been yanked, her attorney told her. Worse yet, immigration officials canceled her application for a green card, or permanent residence visa, because she and her husband missed an interview in November.

She could be deported back to Australia.

How could that be? she demanded. She and her husband, a St. Petersburg firefighter, had filled out all the proper paperwork.

When they moved from St. Petersburg to their new four-bedroom house in Riverview in January, she'd sent two notices of the new address to the immigration office.

Even so, she discovered that an immigration official had sent a letter about the interview to the old address. It was a bureaucratic error in a large government agency. And suddenly the Arazies' world was crashing down.

"She lost her job; she's illegal now," Michael Arazie, 36, said this week. "She can't work now. We have a mortgage. We have a car payment. We have bills. . . . We did everything above and beyond and it's still not okay," he said.

Would immigration own up to its mistake?

Three days before Christmas, the couple would have their answer.

An international romance

Michael Arazie was tired of the local dating scene.

Born and raised in St. Petersburg, Arazie, a firefighter-paramedic for the city, couldn't find anyone with whom he really clicked.

He branched out on the Internet. Long drawn to Australia from educational television programs, he put his cursor on the country logo while visiting an online dating service.

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Lynda Arazie remembers her attraction to American men. They seemed to be such "gentlemen." The two found each other online in May 2002, and never stopped talking.

Lynda visited Florida that fall. Michael met her at the airport with flowers. They went to Outback Steakhouse. They chased squirrels - something Lynda had never seen - in Phillippe Park in Safety Harbor. The two married there in March 2003.

That same month, Lynda applied for a green card as the wife of a U.S. citizen.

Three months later she got a work permit and took a job as an administrative assistant for financial advisers in Tampa.

The two found a **dream** house in Riverview: a four-bedroom, two-story home fronting a lake for about \$150,000. They moved there in January and sent a change-of-address form through overnight mail to immigration officials in Tampa. They followed up with a phone call, and were told everything was fine. They applied to adopt a child.

Life went on as normal. The pair bought a 2005 Ford Escape for their growing family.

And then they got the call.

"You have to start over"

The letter arrived in attorney Charles Samaha's office Dec. 8 from Immigration.

He'd received a notice weeks earlier about their appointment for an interview on Nov. 10, he said. The interview is typically the last step before the immigrant receives a green card, or permanent residency, he said. The officials ask questions and look through leases, mortgages and taxes to make sure the marriage is legitimate.

Samaha said he tried to call the couple to tell them about the appointment, but the number he had for them no longer worked.

Lynda Arazie said she never told Samaha about the new address and phone number because she assumed his job of preparing their initial paperwork was over.

When he got the letter on Dec. 8 that said Lynda's case was canceled, Samaha tracked the couple down through one of their relatives in the phone book.

When Samaha finally reached her, Lynda told her boss the situation, and was told she had to resolve the situation before continuing to work there. She left the office and went home, and the couple called a toll-free immigration number.

"My biggest concern was that I wasn't allowed to work," she said.

How could they afford the house, the SUV, the new baby about to arrive?

Officials told her they couldn't help. She and Michael would have to make another appointment with the Tampa office - online.

"They said you have to start over," Michael Arazie said.

That could take another 18 months, and possibly another \$800 to \$1,000. Plus, Lynda would have to wait for another work permit, likely to take three months.

"It's hard to get a hold of anybody," Lynda Arazie said.

"You can't talk to anybody in charge," Michael Arazie said.

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They made an appointment online for Dec. 20. Meanwhile, Samaha e-mailed and phoned officials, but got no response.

"It's almost Christmas, and she's not working," said Michael Arazie, who began taking on overtime shifts, including Christmas, for extra income. "We're wondering how we're going to survive."

Defeated and desperate

At the meeting on Monday, the immigration official seemed irritated, the couple said.

There was nothing she could do, she told them.

They returned home, defeated and desperate, fearing the adoption might fall through.

"I wanted to tell her where to go, but you can't because they got your life in their hands," Lynda Arazie said. "I thought I did everything right."

It turns out, she did.

Kristen Holland, acting officer in charge of the office of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services in Tampa, looked into the case after being contacted by a St. Petersburg Times reporter this week.

An immigration supervisor in Tampa had rectified the Arazie case on Dec. 16, four days before the couple's unsuccessful meeting with a different immigration official, Holland said Wednesday.

"I don't know who they spoke to," Holland said. But she acknowledged the mistake belonged to the immigration office.

"When we make an error, we fix it," she said. The office handles thousands of cases a year and sometimes flubs because "we're human," she added. Lynda Arazie can work again, too, she said.

Contacted by phone with the update, Michael Arazie was almost speechless. "Oh, wow," he said. "Oh, wow. That's super news."

The immigration office is in the process of sending out another notice for a new appointment, an interview like the one the couple missed Nov. 10. This time, Holland said, the notice will go to the Riverview address.

Times researcher Cathy Wos contributed to this story. Sandra Amrhein can be reached at (813) 226-3383 or amrhein@sptimes.com.

Graphic

PHOTO, CHRIS ZUPPA; Michael and Lynda Arazie

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