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Nick Sestrac
photo by Chris Fritchie



the U.S. Embassy. “Then the adventure began,” Mr. Sestrac says, recalling that day. The paper chase which ensued is a bit mind-boggling; months of wandering through education archives in search of proof of primary school attendance, establishing proof of work history and having all the proper medical exams. All of this just to become pre-approved for what was still a slim to nothing chance, since it was obvious at this point, this wasn’t a true lottery but a bureaucratic process with many “hoops.”

Saying goodbye to all your friends and family to fly over the ocean to a place where you have no history – there is no easy way to do that.

The last hurdle was to pay a nonrefundable fee of \$1,000 for both their passport visas. This equaled two months salary for Mr. Sestrac. But the Sestracs were eventually granted their final interview with the Embassy Council and selected as two of the approximately 2,000 Romanian immigrants approved that year. The “two” became even more significant when they learned only 5,000 lottery visas were approved worldwide that same year. Once the Sestracs obtained their visas, they sold everything they owned, stuffed four suitcases and said “Goodbye.” As Mr. Sestrac recounts, “Saying goodbye to all your friends and family to fly over the ocean to a place where you have no history – there is no

Living the American Dream

By Monica Issitt

MOVING TO a new community usually evokes a combination of excitement and anxiety for both children and adults. As newcomers go, Niculae Sestrac has a unique, actually amazing, story. His sense of appreciation for the opportunities he’s had and reverence for the people who have helped him set him apart in his field and in his community.

Originally from Romania, Mr. Sestrac emigrated to the U.S. three years ago, with his wife, Oana Monica, the person he names as his biggest supporter. The obstacles they have overcome demonstrate how strong the desire can

be to come to the United States and to the tenacity required to build a life and a living here.

Emigrating to the U.S. from Romania is nearly impossible, so Mr. Sestrac and his wife elected to try the visa lottery, a long shot at best. “We just applied one night and forgot about it,” says Mr. Sestrac. The dream was just too big so there was no sense wondering or worrying about it. They applied in the same way to Canada and Australia, never thinking they would ever actually get to the United States.

Seven months later a large envelope was clogging their mailbox; it was from

easy way to do that.”

Now Mr. Sestrac is an integral part of the studio of Chris Thrash & Associates. He is the camera operator, video and sound editor, graphic designer, 3-D artist, technical consultant, light technician, sound engineer and all-around project manager.

Mr. Sestrac has done production and editing for projects in more than ten countries around the globe, becoming a standout as one of the most internationally savvy videographers in the area. Having worked in the video production industry for more than fifteen years, he is now able to put his experience working on commercials, documentaries and corporate films into building the studio with Chris Thrash.

Mr. Sestrac spent six years on the faculty of the Electronics and Communication Department at the University of Polytechnics, Bucharest working with heavily awarded masters in the field. On one editing project, Mr. Sestrac worked alongside Christina Ionescu, professor at the Theatre and Film Academy in Bucharest. Mrs. Ionescu, who is touted as one of the best film editors in Romania, became a mentor to Mr. Sestrac. When he expressed an interest in taking one of her courses, she wasn't sure what she could teach him that he hadn't already picked up intuitively. The two remain friends to this day.

Mr. Sestrac's technical experience alone would have been enough to get him the job at Mr. Thrash's studio but the day the two met there was an immediate bond. Mr. Sestrac radiated honesty and trustworthiness. Mr. Sestrac was hired on the spot. "I have always been thankful that Chris had faith in me, because many people turn you away as soon as they hear an accent," explains Mr. Sestrac. "The United States was our first choice because it is a melting pot; people are just more accepting here than in more culturally conservative countries. Still, there is some hesitancy to trust someone different. I never had that problem with Chris; he accepted me on day one."

When someone works hard and appreciates every gift, it often seems they



Church in Bucharest, Romania

The United States was our first choice because it is a melting pot; people are just more accepting here than in other countries.

are doubly rewarded and such is the case with Mr. Sestrac. Mr. Thrash and his wife, Toni, in particular, have been immensely generous by sponsoring a two-week trip for the Sestracs to return to their native country, which they had not been able to visit in almost three years. During the visit Mr. Sestrac was able to see his 13-year-old daughter, Paula, from a previous marriage. "Chris and his family have been a blessing for Oana and me," Mr. Sestrac says. "They have helped us more than we could have dreamed and I think, more than they realize."

With the help of friends like Vasile and Michele Cartoian, who also immigrated to North Texas several years ago, the Sestracs had a safety net in their new

home. One of the requirements in obtaining a visa is a contact that will aid the new arrivals in securing things most of us take for granted; things like social security cards, bank accounts and apartment applications. It took a few months for the couple's visas to go through, during which time they could not work or establish credit. Mr. Sestrac explains, "Vasile and Michele gave us a place to stay, often took time off work to drive us where we needed to go and were co-signers on papers we needed from the bank and other places. Without them, we would not still be here. They have given us hope."

One of the most difficult situations for someone arriving in a new country is the painful contrast of having a support network of friends and family back home to almost zero support. Mr. Sestrac is also especially grateful for Vishal and Kajuri Ramchand. "They have taken care of us from the very beginning, helping us anytime we needed anything.

They have helped us both spiritually and materially and they mean a great deal to us," Mr. Sestrac says.

Being resolute enough to make years of financial and personal sacrifices just to be in the U.S. says a lot about someone's character, but there was still one more challenge Mr. Sestrac had to overcome. His exposure to English was limited in Romania and while he did have to do all of his course work in English, he would often watch American movies to learn faster. Upon his arrival in the U.S., he still considered himself a beginning English speaker. "I read as many books as I can in English and force myself to think in English," he says. Anyone who has ever learned a second language knows how incredibly difficult that is, particularly as an adult.

Mr. Sestrac's ability to forge life-long relationships and succeed in his chosen field are things we all strive for. But the fact that he has gone to such great lengths to accomplish these things, become an expert in media production and done it all with thankfulness and humility is something truly rare.

Monica Issitt is a freelance writer living in McKinney.