

What Are We Saying to Other People?.....January 27, 2007

By Pamela J. Karg

For the fourth or fifth time while serving in Armenia, I had to face this week the sad face and wondering eyes of a person who wants me to explain what America is really saying to the rest of the world. Instead of having answers, I wonder myself.

The issue at the root of the questions centers around visas. Who gets them and who doesn't get them? How do America's visa gatekeepers determine who can be trusted and who is trying to come legally, but stay illegally?

When I left America at the end of June 2006, the national headlines screamed about the millions and millions of illegal immigrants who were "taking our jobs" and "wanting our social services." Thousands of people weighed in with their opinions, citing facts, offering solutions and repeating heresy. Even the Friday Morning Men's Coffee Club at the First United Methodist Church in downtown Baraboo piled anecdotal evidence upon rumor and innuendo to come to the same inevitable solution it always does on any issue debated: Something had to be done.

It was hard to listen to the varying viewpoints when the person speaking opined with phrases that always seemed to boil down to "those people." As if the discussion was about creatures who were something other than human beings.

During my time here, I've actually met a couple people who have received visas to travel to America. I know many others who have been denied for what appears to be some sixth sense the screeners use to determine they are not worthy of coming to America.

The first people I know granted "green cards" to move to America were Hovik and Lianna. For several years, Hovik had been using part of his meager, hard-earned salary to enter his name into a lottery run by the U.S. government that awards residency opportunities. Their names were picked and, after a couple day-long rides up to the U.S. Embassy in Georgia, their second-guessing on what paperwork to present seemed to be in order. Some relatives already in the U.S. were able to scrap together the \$40,000 required to be posted on behalf of the couple and their two sons. They found some money to buy airline tickets. The family left in the middle of December 2005 and settled in the Los Angeles area like so many Armenians tend to do because of the tight-knit community there—and the warmer weather, of course.

The second person I know granted a tourist visa was Nellie. The oldest of three children, she had befriended a former Peace Corps worker here and was invited to come to America for a vacation. Working for three years at two jobs, she was able to contribute to the family household income and even save a little money to get together the required \$100 to apply to the Embassy for a chance to go to America. Filling out applications and, again, second-guessing at what paperwork to present, Nellie went to an interview where she was grilled about her job stability and how she could afford to take a three-month vacation, all apparently in an effort to try to determine whether she could be trusted to return.

Others I know who have received travel visas to America include a couple women from the United Methodist Committee on Relief. They went for meetings and training in New York City after submitting their applications, paperwork and \$100—and sitting through publically conducted interviews that included personal questions about their family status, their pay scale and how much money they had in the bank.

Meanwhile, I have a couple very good Armenian friends and colleagues who have gone through the same process, paid their fees and were denied even short-term, bona fide business

travel visas. Why? I guess it boils down to that the interviewer didn't think the applicants could be trusted. At least that's what I can surmise from my friends re-counting the humiliating interview process, off-hand comments by the interviewers and apparent lack of review of the paperwork painstakingly pulled together.

Why do Armenians—or anyone from a Third World country like Armenia—want to come to America? (We can debate whether Armenia is a Third World country at another time.)

The reasons vary as much as the people who want to travel. However, my experiences tell me that *opportunity* and *curiosity* drive many of my friends to seek the coveted American visa.

For months prior to leaving, I tried to explain to Hovik that his life in America would be no better than his life in Armenia. As an immigrant who never took the time here to learn English—even though Lianna taught it and I offered to help him—Hovik was destined to work in back-breaking, minimum-wage jobs. As a self-taught auto mechanic lacking experience with today's vehicular microchips, Hovik ended up in such a job. Tradition—and perhaps prohibited due to the type of green card they family won—prevented Lianna from working. Combined with some form of welfare payments, Lianna cried over the phone that the family was no better off than they were in Armenia.

But they will remain because, even though life is tough right now, there are more opportunities there than they see for themselves and especially for their sons here right now. Prior to joining UMCOR as a driver and earning about \$250 monthly, Hovik had not worked for several years. Instead, the family relied on the \$30 Lianna earned monthly teaching English in a public school. The cost of living may be higher in America, eating up most of their welfare payments and Hovik's salary, but the opportunities to get a second job or to improve his skills to improve his wages are more abundant there.

Opportunities. America is filled with them and people from places such as Armenia just want a chance at those opportunities. In a city where 30 percent of the people are unemployed—and the rest of the country where unemployment averages 40 percent—people just want an opportunity to work.

Curiosity is the other reason people want to come to America. They want to see if life and people there really match up with the culture, customs, values and glitz-and-glitter they've learned about from movies, music videos and the nightly TV soap opera "Brazil," set in both Rio de Janeiro and Miami.

Some want to take a trip of a lifetime to see their relatives, who may have left right after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Others just want to spend money at hotels, restaurants, clothing stores and tourist attractions while they vacation, tour, rest and just enjoy life in a world where there is always running cold and hot water, always available (except after terrible storms) electricity, central heating and air conditioning, stores with everything under one roof, wide-open green spaces and thriving communities.

We fill the world's eyes and minds with these images as well as notions of democracy, freedom and opportunity. They're curious. They want to see for themselves. So good, honest, hard-working people scrounge up \$100, fill out an application, second guess at what paperwork might be pertinent to an Embassy employee and try their luck at getting a visa.

Too often, I've seen these same people come back bewildered and dejected. They were turned down. And, why? Well, I've heard several of the reasons they were told—not only at the U.S. Embassy but other Western embassies as well.

One young man was turned down twice on his American visa request. The first time, he admits, he applied on a whim and went in wearing a “Hooters” T-shirt an American had given him. He wanted to go to bring back another friend who had over-stayed his visa and whose family needed him. The second time, he had the backing of three Americans (including one who had interned during college in an Embassy and handled visa applications) who promised to take care of him and ensured he would get back on the Armenia-bound plane. The interviewer said he didn’t have enough assets—though tradition here states that, as the only son, all the family’s assets pass to him—and he wasn’t married.

With those rejections stamped into his passport, he applied to two other embassies for short-term visas to travel for work in a new job. One was to scout some English equipment that would have cost upwards of US\$1 million. Despite being a manager, he had switched industries and this application was rejected because the interviewer didn’t believe a good manager could go from one type of business to another industry. The second application was to visit the Australian home office of his new employer. But, again, rejection because he wasn’t married (though he had taken the time to transfer some of the family assets into his name.)

A man and his wife wanted to take a trip of a lifetime to visit family in America. The interviewer allegedly didn’t review the paperwork. Instead, the interview started with a statement that the man’s humanitarian organization was closing. Therefore, the man and his wife had no reason to come back. The application was rejected, despite the fact that the rumor about the closing was just that—a rumor.

Another young man tried to get a visa at least five years ago, but something wasn’t right with one of the passports he had presented on behalf of a whole group of athletes who were going to travel to America. He allegedly has been branded for life despite the fact he now holds a PhD; has a wife and two sons; received visas from European, South American and Asian countries; and was traveling on behalf of an educational institution where he is the assistant director and paid through U.S. government funding.

OK. Now I’ve vented and in rather benign, polite terms. I stated what facts I’ve been told by the people who will talk openly about it. I could produce emails exchanged with the U.S. Consular on behalf of one of the applicants or a letter written to the U.S. Consular to stop the rumors. Yet, it could cost me. Worse yet, it could cost my friends who might want to apply for a visa someday and ask me to write another supporting letter.

I realize we want to be careful about who we let in—or let out. After all, we don’t want “those people” coming in and creating national security issues—or even neighborhood security issues. As for all those other people, though, who want to pursue opportunities or look around in curiosity, I just stand before them in wonder because I don’t have any answers for their rejections.

We travel around the world, telling people all about America and dangling that big carrot in front of them. Yet, when they reach out to grab the carrot, we not only yank it away, but we beat them with the stick from which it dangles. What are we *really* telling people?