

Starting Over in America



Two Iranian physicians are making a new life in the United States, earning OU degrees and discovering the joys of parenthood.

BY WHITNEY BRYEN

INSIDE THEIR NORMAN HOME, Farid Omoumi watches his 1-year-old daughter giggle as his wife, Mehri Mobaraki-Omoumi, peppers her chubby cheeks with kisses. This simple moment captures the American dream that drove the couple to leave their home in Iran, but they never imagined the struggles they would endure in search of a better life for themselves, and now, for their daughter.

“Things didn’t work out like we wanted so far and I don’t know what will happen in the next couple of years,” Farid says. “We’re behind compared to our life in Iran. We are still working to get our lives back on track. But I would do

this 100 times again because Cadence will have a better life than we had.”

After struggling through the immigration process, losing their medical careers and being separated from family, the 39-year-old students are finding renewed faith in their future at the University of Oklahoma.

Farid, now a Ph.D. student researching enhanced medical imaging for breast cancer, arrived in the U.S. in 2008 – more than 20 years after he first began the immigration process. Looking to join his uncle in Oklahoma, Farid, along with his parents and two brothers, applied for green cards in 1984 to escape the war between Iran and Iraq, which had reached Farid’s hometown of Tabriz in East Azerbaijan.

“When I was child, 4 or 5, there were airstrikes many times a day in my hometown,” Farid says. “We left the city to go to distant, rural areas to not be hit by bombs and missiles. There was always anxiety of what was going to happen. Will I die? Will my parents die?”

Their applications were slowly working their way through the system, until they finally climbed to the top of the pile in 1999. Farid’s parents and two brothers were approved, but by that time Farid was no longer a child as he was listed on the family’s original application, and he was denied. He applied again, this time as an adult, but the process was prolonged



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by new policies and procedures that followed the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001. Nine years after his family left Iran, Farid’s green card was approved and he joined his family in Oklahoma.

For Mehri, a mechanical engineering graduate student, the immigration process was shorter, but still frustrating and lonely. The couple met as classmates at the Tabriz University of Medical Science. They were in the same internship group, but their relationship was strictly professional until Mehri took a residency program in Turkey and the pair reconnected on Facebook. Farid was already in Oklahoma and the couple sustained the long-distance relationship mostly through online chats and video.

In 2010, the pair was married in Iran and, after only a

few weeks together, Farid had to return to America, leaving his new wife behind. For nearly four years, Mehri anxiously awaited her green card, talking to her husband daily online and cherishing the few weeks each year he was able to visit.

“It was horrible,” Mehri says. “We had to learn how to look to the future, to the next day, to be hopeful.”

Finally, in 2014, Mehri joined her husband in Norman. But arriving in the United States was only the beginning of a series of challenges that would follow.

ONE STEP FORWARD, TWO STEPS BACK

While he waited through the immigration process, Farid graduated from medical school and worked as a general prac-

itioner and managing director of a clinic in Tabriz, a city of 1.75 million. By the time he arrived in the United States, he had five years of experience as a practicing physician.

Mehri also worked as a doctor while awaiting her green card and both planned to practice medicine in their new home, but a series of unexpected challenges caused a detour for both physicians.

To practice in the United States, they needed to pass a series of medical exams that were made even more challenging because English is their second language. It took years of studying, learning to type on an American keyboard and practicing English, but Farid eventually passed all the tests and began applying to residency programs – the final requirement to getting his U.S. medical license. Despite his experience, the 90 programs Farid applied to were not interested in a candidate who had been out of medical school for nearly 10 years. The only option that remained was to restart medical school in the United States.

“I came to the United States to improve myself and step forward, not go backward,” Farid says.

After seven years of working toward his goal, it was time to move on. In 2015, in his mid-30s, Farid began pursuing new career options. He considered becoming a nurse or a physician’s assistant but those seemed like steps in the wrong direction.

“For all my life I was the one who was ordering things and visiting patients and deciding how to help patients and now I’d have to let someone else do that,” Farid says. “I knew that wouldn’t make me happy.”

Farid began shadowing oncologist Dr. Jennifer Holter at the OU Health Sciences Center. He could not work with patients, but he could help them behind the scenes. Dr. Holter guided and advised Farid about the American health care system and set up a meeting between Farid and Dr. Hong Liu at OU’s Electrical and Computer Engineering program.

The next fall, in 2016, Farid joined Liu’s team as a Ph.D. student working on medical imaging, including X-rays and ultrasounds. Farid is working on new imaging technology to better detect breast cancer in women with dense breasts.

“It’s great because I’m still helping people,” Farid says. “Maybe even more people than before when I was seeing patients.”

By the time Mehri joined her husband in Oklahoma she knew her chances of practicing medicine were slim. Mehri was determined and took the exams anyway. She passed all tests, but, just like her husband, she lacked the fresh education and top exam scores needed to get into competitive residency programs.

“Fifteen years of all my hard work was for nothing,” Mehri says. “It was so hard for me to think that I should give up my white coat.”

Though it would take years, Mehri decided to start medical school over in the United States and had begun studying for her entrance exam when she was once again derailed. This time it was a happy surprise.

“I found out I was pregnant and I knew I had to change all aspects of my life,” Mehri says. “If medicine was my love before, now I have another love, a more true one. It will be for her.”

TRAVEL BAN TRIALS

Farid’s father and brother were great support for the couple, but since becoming pregnant, Mehri missed the love and advice of her mother. She immediately began planning for a visit from her mom, whom she had not seen since moving to Oklahoma.



Mehri Mobaraki-Omoumi recently had the chance to visit her mother in Iran and introduce her 1-year-old daughter Cadence to her grandmother for the first time.

The visa applications were rejected twice under an executive travel ban issued in early 2017. The order banned travelers to the United States from some majority-Muslim countries, including Iran. And since Mehri was not yet an official



U.S. citizen, she was unsure whether she would be allowed to return.

“During my pregnancy I just wanted my mom to come here to be with me,” Mehri says. “She’s my first child and, yeah, I’m a doctor, but I know what to do with sick babies, not with healthy ones. I’d never changed diapers or given a bath to a baby. I just wanted my mom to be by my side. It was crushing.”

In June, the Supreme Court upheld the latest travel ban, which still includes Iran. But Mehri passed her citizenship test early this year, allowing her to safely visit Iran and the family she had not seen since 2014. Mehri’s parents met their 1-year-old granddaughter, Cadence, for the first time in July.

Even though the family support system was strained by U.S. policy, an article in the campus newspaper about the travel ban brought some unexpected comfort. After reading about Mehri and Farid in the *OU Daily*, Marilyn Korhonen, associate director of the Center for Research Program Development

and Enrichment, contacted them and asked if she could throw a baby shower.

“I just wanted to tell them that I live here in this community with you and this is not OK with me and if there is something I can do to help you, I want to,” Korhonen says.

Farid and Mehri agreed to Korhonen’s offer but, in lieu of gifts, they asked attendees to provide a donation. The group included some of Korhonen’s friends, other OU faculty and Mehri’s English tutor, who she describes as her “U.S. granny.” They raised \$400 for the Norman-based Center for Children and Families.

Since the shower, Korhonen has become a friend, confidante and support for Mehri. She visits Mehri often and has framed photographs of Cadence on her desk and the windowsill in her office.

“It wasn’t just me bringing her into my world, but her bringing me into theirs, too,” Korhonen says. “I hope I can be someone they can talk to about things, American things, that’s safe for them. And I’m asking and learning about another culture.”

‘She will have our American dream’

The campus community has given Farid and Mehri a place to belong and to explore a new, brighter future, the couple says.

Farid and Mehri call the OU campus home, especially since Mehri became a graduate student in OU’s Mechanical Engineering program this spring. She is working with Chung Hao Lee to improve synthetic heart valves in patients who have a valve disorder.

“If we were not in an academic field, there was no way to think about staying in the U.S.,” Farid says. “The University of Oklahoma provided us the opportunity to stay, to choose to be an American, to try to succeed, hope for a better life and give back to the American society what they have already given us.”

Despite the constant challenges that plagued their first years in the United States, Farid and Mehri agree that the trials were worth it.

“Here we are alone, so everything we’re doing is from us,” Mehri says. “It’s more admirable. It’s harder. And we didn’t get used to it quickly, but we learned and it makes us more proud of ourselves because of that. Now, we’re thinking we can do it.”

Mehri, who is still kissing Cadence in their Norman home, leans back for a better look at the grinning baby and says, “This year has been a win. She will have freedom here. She won’t have to struggle like we do. She will have everything. She will have our American dream.”

Whitney Bryen is a freelance writer in Norman.