

Ever Thankful: Woman fulfilling dream as American citizen

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Maria Rustick grew up in Sydney, Australia but was so fascinated with the United States she cheered for America instead of Australia when watching the Olympics.

Now, she that has become an American citizen, Rustick said she is thankful to be in the country she has always loved.

Rustick, 43, first came to America in December 1998, after meeting a man online and feeling like it was just right. She had always been intrigued by Americans and, after arriving with her two children, she wasn't disappointed.

"It was just love at first sight," Rustick said. "Wisconsin was a big culture shock with the snow, the blizzards and that. But I love it. I love the cold weather."

Her son only stayed for about a year before moving back to Australia to live with his father. But her daughter stayed, and has become a permanent resident.

Rustick eventually married the man. However, the marriage didn't work and the couple separated.

"It was hard," Rustick said. "I've been homeless. I have slept on the floor with no furniture. I thought, 'that's how the pilgrims started, coming to a country with nothing, absolutely nothing.' I left my entire family back home, sold all my things, my furniture, my car, and gave up everything and came. It was a struggle."

She said the only time she regretted the move was when she lost her grandparents, three of whom have died since her move to America. Her father has health problems, and she worries about something happening to him.

"My father has had so many heart surgeries and I'm thinking, 'What if anything ever happens?' I'm never going to say goodbye," Rustick said. "That's the only time I ever regretted it. Otherwise, being hungry, being cold and homeless, I still persevered."

Her daughter, now 22, will go back to Australia in December for the first time since the move.

"My father hasn't seen her since she was a little girl," Rustick said. "My mother doesn't know she's going. That's going to be a surprise for my mother. They said she sounds like a little American."

Rustick said her daughter wants to be a firefighter. However, she has been thinking of joining the Army for a few years. Is Rustick happy with that decision?

“I said, ‘You’re serving your country,’” she said.

Rustick said it would be another five or six years before her daughter can complete the long and expensive process of becoming a citizen.

“When you’re a permanent resident, you’re in a transition,” Rustick said. “You can’t vote. You can’t do jury duty. You can’t do certain things when you’re a permanent resident. But once you become that citizen, you are just like everybody else, and you have those rights. That’s what made me so happy when I got my citizenship.”

Rustick had a big year in 2010. She became an American citizen, more than 10 years after moving to the United States. She also got married to her husband, Randy, who she describes as a romantic.

“My biggest dream was to see Mount Rushmore and that’s where he popped the question,” Rustick said. “It’s just so awesome just to see something that amazing and he popped the question right there.”

Randy flew her son in for their wedding.

“He surprised me with a ticket,” Rustick said. “That was really nice.”

Rustick said another dream is to visit Ellis Island. She and her husband want to visit it together.

“I want to feel and see what they came through. We had it easy,” Rustick said. “What they went through to come here was hard.”

She said that the immigration process is still stressful.

“You’re like a herd of cattle,” Rustick said. “That’s what we were. You’re waiting and waiting and waiting to get in line to see somebody to get assistance to get an application for your green card. It is very stressful.”

She said that there is nothing that can automatically allow someone to stay.

“Just because you’re married to an American doesn’t mean you can stay,” Rustick said. “People think you’re married to an American, you can automatically stay. That’s not the case. They can tell you, ‘No. Buh-bye.’ We were very lucky.”

She said with the upcoming holidays, she works hard to have a traditional observation.

“It’s crazy. It’s just like what you see on TV,” Rustick said. “I’m always cooking and baking. I always try to do the American thing; the apple pie or the chocolate chip cookies. I watch a lot of Turner Classic Movies and I always see how they used to do things and what they did for Thanksgivings and Christmas meals and Fourth of July things.”

She said she drives her husband crazy with turkey and mashed potatoes and biscuits and squash and cranberries.

“We do the turkey and the trimmings,” Rustick said. “I try to do it — fancy table and the fancy china. We say what we’re thankful for and one of them was to be here. That’s the greatest joy, to have that. I just wish that everybody felt like that. Something tragic has to happen for everybody to bind together. Why can’t we just get on and bind and be family? Being so far away from family, it’s like, I want to hug everybody.”

She said she loves all of the seasons and being able to play in the snow.

“I love throwing snowballs,” Rustick said. “If anyone is out there and I’m walking out to get to the car, they’re targets for me. Everybody. I don’t care who is walking by. Then everybody joins in. It’s beautiful.”

Rustick has dual citizenships, because Australia will not allow its citizens to give up their citizenship.

“I got into a little disagreement with the Australian government,” she said. “I said, ‘No, I pledged my allegiance. I gave up every other sovereign.’ They said, ‘Australia doesn’t give up their citizens that easy.’ I said, ‘What are you talking about?’ They said, ‘You’re a dual citizen.’ I said, ‘I didn’t ask for that.’ They said, ‘You’ve got no choice.’

She said many people don’t understand how lucky they are to have been born in this country.

“I can’t explain how I feel living here. I am blessed to be here,” Rustick said. “You guys are lucky. You’re truly, truly lucky. I could not think of any better place to live.”