

First Time

A NEW AMERICAN

Tarkan Mekik celebrates his first day as a U.S. citizen

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This is the fourth in a year-long series offering a look at various "firsts" for people around the region.

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This is the third in a year-long series offering a look at various "firsts" for people around the region. The Blade will chronicle another first on the initial Sunday of each month.

Playing golf in a cold, stiff wind that blows his mane of black hair and bites into his hands, Tarkan Mekik can't help but notice how different things are for him here, far from his old home in southern Turkey.

He's standing just outside Swanton at the moment, and there's no snow on the ground - for now - which is just fine with the man who turns 32 today.

"I'm tired of snow," he said. "I don't like it."

In fact, until he came to America, he'd never seen it. Before he came to America in 2001, he never golfed either.

What better way, then, to spend his first day as a U.S. citizen?

There was a special sweetness to walking the links with his American father-in-law, who taught him the game about a year ago, two men from two different worlds brought together by an unexpected love.

Tarkan met Charles Russell Burrough's daughter, Janice, at a jewelry store near the Incirlik Air Base in Turkey five years ago. She was there with the Air National Guard, and he was a clerk at the store who hoped one day to open his own business.

They hit it off immediately and were married a year later, at which point he followed her to Toledo. But Charles, a retired Army guy from Swanton with silver hair, had concerns, and the couple didn't tell him of their wedding vows until more than a year later.

"I judged him before I knew him," he said. "I knew Turkish soldiers ... was judging him by them."

The extent to which his view has changed is reflected in their many weekends together spent fishing or golfing, in the way Tarkan pats the older man's shoulder as they walk down the fairway, in the loving way he calls him "Dad," and in Tarkan's decision to take Russell as his middle name when he became a U.S. citizen hours earlier.

That moment - an 11 a.m. ceremony in U.S. District Court in Toledo - was an incredibly special one for all of them.

"I got up at 5 o'clock. Couldn't sleep," said Janice, 49. "I'm more nervous than he is."

Not that there was any reason to be. Tarkan had made it into the country with ease, even though it was only a month after 9/11. He had passed the citizenship test without a problem, getting help studying from co-workers at Fed Ex, where he works in quality assurance, and missing only one question, even though the test occurred just days after the death of his mother-in-law. (He wore her pin of an angel with an American flag on his lapel during the naturalization ceremony.)



Tarkan Mekik, center, a native of Turkey who came to this country in 2001, recites the Pledge of Allegiance during his naturalization ceremony. (THE BLADE/ANDY MORRISON)

With his wife, father-in-law, and sister-in-law watching from the back row of a courtroom, Tarkan took his place among 35 other immigrants waiting to become citizens, looking back occasionally to flash a broad grin and thumbs up sign.

Later, he walked back to them to chat and practice his oath-taking abilities. "I will, I shall, I do," he said quickly over and over while holding up his right hand, then laughing.

At 10:10 a.m., he got nervous and popped a stick of gum in his mouth. He spit it out 20 minutes later, worried that he might not be able to talk with it in there.

"He never gets nervous, but now he's getting nervous," said Janice, a master sergeant and information management specialist in the Ohio Air National Guard's 180th Fighter Wing.

The moment of transformation passed in a flash. The judge came in and said a few words, Tarkan raised his hand and with his most serious face said, "I do." And voila, he was American.

The ceremony lasted a little longer, full of speeches and handshakes and certificates, but Tarkan's enthusiasm was only getting started. He met his wife when it was all over with a joyful smile and loving embrace - love for her and for his new country.

"I feel good, feel free," he said.

That means something to someone like Tarkan, who spent 18 months in Cyprus during a mandatory stint in the Turkish military. He had thought about continuing his time as a soldier, but decided against it.

"I like to be free," he explained. "I don't want to spend the rest of my life under commanders."

Still, it's hard living away from his family, and his new life here has been a series of adjustments. Back home, he worked six days a week, 12 hours a day. When he first came here and got a part-time job with Fed Ex, his schedule called for only three-and-a-half hours a day.

"What is this? What kind of job is this?" he remembers thinking at the time. "I like working. I wanted to work."

He has a full-time position now and has hopes of further promotions and someday still starting his own business.

At home in Toledo, things were different too. For one thing, he had a lawn for the first time.

"He thought it was cool to mow the lawn, cool to rake leaves" Janice said. "But that got old quick."

Some of the cool things did last, like golfing and fishing with his Dad. They spend many weekends together and Tarkan, who has a 75-gallon fish tank, dreams of one day owning a house with a pond.

"That way, I can fish anytime want," he said.

But standing outside the federal courtroom on his big day - before the golf, before a celebratory lunch, before the late-night drinks with friends - he wasn't thinking of any of this. He simply basked in the comfort of knowing that he won't ever have to worry about paperwork to stay here with his wife and new family.

"That's the most exciting thing is to stay with my wife," he said. "My wife is here. My life is here."

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