



## Chasing the North American dream

By *Eleftherios P. Diamandis*

**O**n a warm October day in 1986, I boarded a jumbo jet in Athens, Greece, with my wife, my 5-year-old daughter and my 3-year-old son. It had been only a week since I had finished my medical degree at the University of Athens, and my wife and I, both of us Greek natives born on the island of Cyprus, had chosen to leave our country behind. We were bound for a new life in Toronto.

Why did we make such a choice? At the time, both my wife and I held tenured positions as assistant professors at the University of Athens, and our decision to give them up and chase the North American dream seemed crazy to everyone we knew in Athens. But our motivations were clear to us.

The financial troubles Greece is facing today were not much different in 1986. At the time, the university was offering us a research budget of \$100 per year and no other opportunities to apply for competitive funding. To do our research, we used to look around and see which reagents were available, then plan our experiments. It was very clear that real research was going to be impossible under such conditions. We felt we had no other choice; if we wanted to stay in the field and our research to thrive, we had to go somewhere else.

In between my medical studies in Athens, I'd taken two years off to train as a clinical biochemist in

Toronto. During that time, I'd met a lot of people who expressed interest in employing my wife and me, were we to come back.

Looking back at this move after 30 years, I can cite a lot of positives. But more interesting to me now are the many difficulties we faced that I had not anticipated when we made the decision to go.

### The successes

We were a professional success in Toronto. I ascended to the highest ranks of academia, opened a research lab and published extensively. My wife still enjoys her work as a senior scientist at a major hospital. Along with our professional accomplishments came financial success.

In 1974, while in Greece and Cyprus, we tasted the bitterness of a war that had exploded between the Greek and Turkish Cypriots, severing Cyprus into two and turning half of the Greek Cypriot population into refugees. During this period, I was called to the army, and I saw firsthand that the wildest animal on Earth is a man at war. Our transition to Canada immediately relieved our family of the mishaps of a war that continued on for years after we left.

Being an academic that worked abroad also gave me a lot of prestige in my native country, and my wife and I started getting invitations to

give lectures and act as consultants for the government. We received awards, including corresponding membership to the prestigious Academy of Athens.

When we came to Canada, our thinking was rather simplistic. We would concentrate on our professional success and our family. At first, as we worked hard to become established, we didn't pay attention to the issues of acculturation that were slowly but steadily arising for all of us.

### Living outside of your natural habitat

In our native Cyprus, the winters were short and mild. When we wanted to see snow, we had to wait until January and then take an excursion from our village to the highest mountain in the country. When we arrived in Toronto, we thought we would grow accustomed to the colder weather and it would not become an issue for us. Unfortunately, acclimatizing is not as easy as it sounds. I now think that the human brain is wired to live in its natural habitat and that some of our brain circuitry malfunctions under totally different environmental conditions. Immigrants are known to suffer from anxiety disorders much more frequently than native populations, and I now believe that vastly different weather and other foreign stressors can render the unprepared brain vulnerable to psychological disorders.



Typically sunny day near the beach in Protaras, Cyprus.



The Toronto skyline in winter.

WIKIMEDIA USER JOHN VETTERLI

## Family disconnect

When we left Cyprus, we left behind our aging parents and many siblings. Our children have grown up deprived of interaction with their grandparents and vice versa. In our culture, staying close to your immediate family is the norm. Immigration to a distant country is painful for those who leave and for those who stay. The situation becomes more difficult as time goes by, because even if you visit regularly, you often cannot be home in times of need.

## Friends and community

Immigrants initially try hard to establish themselves and often do not have much time to develop friendships and participate in community activities. Many immigrants also tend to want to stick together but can have a hard time finding others from their home countries and ultimately develop only limited circles of friends.

## Culture

We came from a country rich with history and culture. But we've found it is extremely difficult to preserve our

culture in a large and mixed society. Somebody told us that second-generation immigrants who cannot speak their native language can no longer preserve their culture, and we find this to be true. To try to counter this loss early on, we enrolled our children in Greek school on Saturdays and Sundays. Naturally they rebelled, insisting weekends should be about pleasurable activities, not schooling to catch up with your parents' culture. We have now accepted that our culture likely will not be passed on through our children.

## Children

When we came to Canada, my two children could not speak English, and the first few years in local schools were a nightmare for them. My son became aggressive because he could not communicate and was frustrated with people talking to him in a language he did not understand. It took a few years for them to get accustomed to all that was different about their new country, and it was tough for us to see them struggling.

When they eventually grew up, we started thinking of their future families. As is customary in our culture,

we originally thought that they would marry people from our own nation, but finally we had to agree with them that their best spouses would be the ones they most liked, independent of what our culture suggests.

## Epilogue

Our transition from a poor country to a rich and advanced country has been a grand professional and financial success. But I've come to believe that the true measure of success should include the happiness of children, parents and other family and take into account cultural and health issues. When we are young, our focus is mostly on professional and financial goals, and other factors are not anticipated or considered. Would I have made a different decision that October day if I had had to consider everything that my family and I ultimately would go through? I will never know.



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