

# Texarkana Monthly

## THE TEXARKANA DREAM

INTRODUCTION BY  
KARA HUMPHREY

PHOTOS BY MOLLY KENDRICK



# The Texarkana D

LAYLA HAZIN  
CANADA



MEL WALSH  
IRELAND



HEIKE SCHEMMELE-CRUZ  
GERMANY



FERNANDA HERNANDEZ  
MEXICO



JESSICA PASTAKIA  
VENEZUELA



ROTIMI IYUN  
NIGERIA



# ream

## WHAT DO ALBERT EINSTEIN, MARTINA NAVRATILOVA, SAMMY SOSA, BOB MARLEY AND JACKIE CHAN ALL HAVE IN COMMON?

The answer is, they were all born in other countries and immigrated to the United States. Their contributions to academia, education, sports, music and television have made them household names and the idols of the generations that follow them. As this Fourth of July is upon us, and we plan family barbeques and firework shows, these celebrations can sometimes be even more meaningful to the men and women who had to leave behind the homes and people they knew and risk everything to celebrate with us.

Texarkana has mixed within the crowds our very own examples of great contributors who first arrived as immigrants. At Texarkana Monthly, we'd like to spend the next few weeks introducing you to some of them and allowing them to tell their stories. Each one is unique and beautiful, but the one thing each story has in common is a declaration of love and appreciation for the United States. Patriotism isn't limited to those of us who were lucky enough to be born with the freedoms and opportunities that the U.S. offers. It is felt in each word written by these great men and women who are Americans by choice. They are our neighbors and friends and just like Einstein, Sosa and countless others whose names aren't so well known, they make this country and community better in countless ways. <sup>TM</sup>

BHAVIN PASTAKIA  
INDIA



JOANNA & RALPH  
GARLITOS  
PHILIPPINES



CHRIS GAVRIEL  
GREECE



MANJULA CARTER  
SRI LANKA



MARSHALL ALAM  
INDONESIA

# Texarkana Monthly



FERNANDA HERNANDEZ



## MY NAME IS FERNANDA HERNANDEZ.

I was born in Querétaro, Mexico in 1991. For me and my family, the American Dream was neatly packed inside two suitcases as we boarded a bus to the United States over two decades ago. The American Dream was just \$1,500 in my parents' pockets and three kids holding on tightly to their hands. That dream began when my parents made the decision to leave Mexico and move our entire lives to the United States. That decision was a sacrifice that demanded everything they owned and knew be left behind to pursue a better life. At the time, I was nine years old and did not fully grasp what that decision meant. I didn't understand the extent of what my parents were giving up, and I wasn't aware that leaving their life behind would mean my future would be drastically different. That understanding would come as I got older and my own "American Dream" began to unfold.

A dream is defined as a cherished aspiration, ambition, or ideal, and that's exactly what my parents were seeking. Their purpose was for our lives to be better and not crippled by a lack of resources, limited education or an environment that would not allow us to reach our full potential. Arriving in Texarkana, Texas was a challenge from the second my foot stepped on U.S. soil, August 8, 2000. I began fourth grade only knowing a handful of English words, which were poorly pronounced.

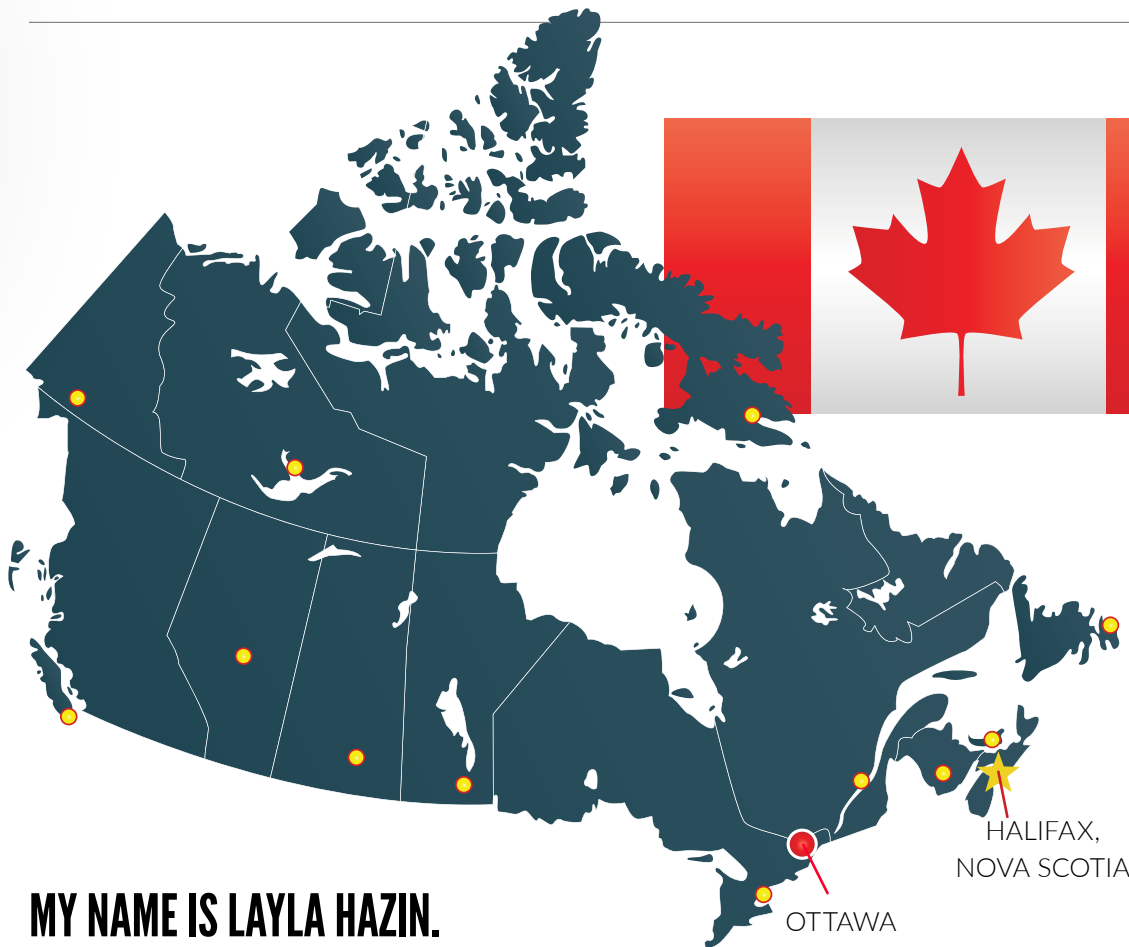
Simple things like participating in class, making friends, or ordering lunch were challenging. The language barrier felt like more than I could handle. There were days I felt like giving up, but I kept going and in just over a year I was fluently bilingual.

The next 20 years in the U.S. were much like the first one. It has been over seven thousand days full of trials and tribulations, but with many goals achieved along the way. I graduated with my bachelor's degree in English Literature, and went on to become an anchor and TV host for KTAL NBC 6. If you had told me 20 years ago that the language I once had no concept of would be the focus of my career, I wouldn't have believed you. That's the thing about the American Dream, it allows you to dream past the country you were born in and allows you to achieve the unimaginable. The price you pay is not cheap and the sacrifice my parents made could never be accurately measured. I thank my mom and dad for changing the course of my life and giving up everything so I could live a fruitful life. I live the American Dream daily, and for me it's about making my family and Mexico proud. 🇲🇽

# Texarkana Monthly



LAYLA HAZIN



**CANADA  
TO  
TEXARKANA**

**1,799 MILES**

## MY NAME IS LAYLA HAZIN.

On our first family vacation to Dallas, Texas, I was ten years old, and I remember feeling like I was in one of the American movies we watched in the Middle East. Visiting the United States as a child, convinced me that everything I could ever want was available in America. I understood why it is referred to as the Land of Opportunity. Everything seemed so big and new, and I could buy all the candy that I had seen in magazines and on television. I never dreamed that 25 years later I would be back in Texas, living my American Dream.

By origin I am a Palestinian, born in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy with no written constitution; everything is under complete and total control of the royal family. My father worked for the American oil company, ARAMCO, so I was lucky to have had American teachers and neighbors living in what was like any small town in Texas. Outside of the ARAMCO community, however, Saudi life was very restricted. Women were prohibited from driving a car, traveling without a related male chaperone or dressing in clothing that didn't cover their entire bodies.

As all parents do, mine wanted their children to have the best education and future. So, they immigrated in the 1990s to Canada, which was encouraging increased immigration. I attended high school in Switzerland and then moved to Halifax, Nova Scotia, where I earned undergraduate and graduate degrees. After graduate

school, I met a fast-talking New Yorker at my brother's wedding. It was love at first sight, so I moved to New York and married the love of my life in 2006. New York taught me how important freedom of religion is to America. In my place of origin, Jerusalem, which is sacred to Jews, Christians, and Muslims, people slaughter each other and destroy each other's homes in the name of their faith. In New York, communities of Jews, Palestinians, and Christians live and work in total harmony because their government represents them all equally. No religion is given official preference, but all are free and treated equally under the law. This is a true American ideal, and I was happy to see it realized, given the many times I experienced the destruction in Palestine firsthand.

My favorite memories in the U.S. include getting married, having each of my beautiful children, and becoming an American citizen in 2018. Learning about the Constitution, and all the rights and liberties it provides, makes me feel deep gratitude for the intelligent shaping of this country. Any person who can imagine the life they want and will work hard for it, can live their dream in America. In the U.S., a person has more freedom to create their own destiny than people from the other places I have visited and lived. It has given me my husband, my children, and the abundant life God intended for me, as a proud Texan in the free land of the United States. 🇺🇸

# TexarkanaMonthly



MEL WALSH



# MY NAME IS MEL WALSH.

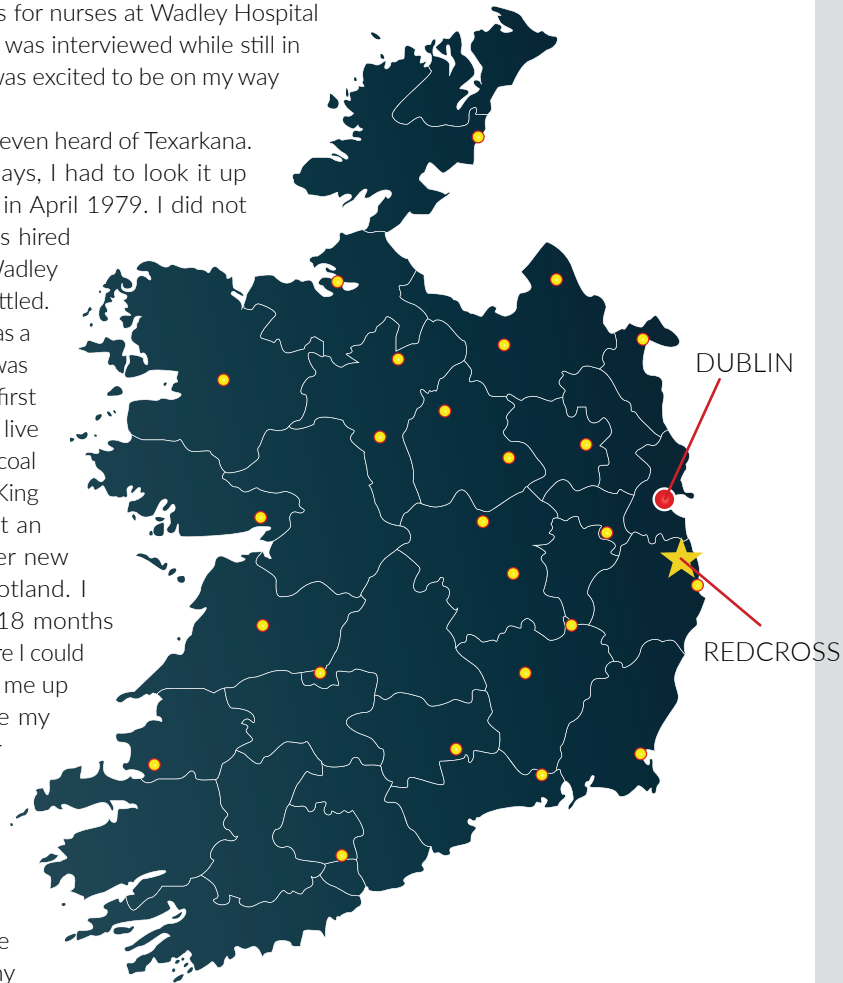
I was born in Ireland on a small dairy farm near the village of Redcross. I was raised with four sisters and two brothers. From a young age, I realized country living was not for me, so after high school graduation I took a job as a nurse's aide and applied for nursing school. After being an aide for a year in a suburb of Dublin called Dun Laoghaire, I was accepted into nursing school at Whipps Cross University Hospital in London. Upon finishing nursing school, I spent the next five years working in London before I decided I wanted a change. So, when I saw an ad in a nursing magazine, advertising available positions for nurses at Wadley Hospital in Texarkana, Texas, I replied to the ad. I was interviewed while still in London. When I learned I got the job, I was excited to be on my way to the United States!

I knew little of Texas and had never even heard of Texarkana. Since there was no Google in those days, I had to look it up on a paper map. I landed in Texarkana in April 1979. I did not know anyone, but there were 40 others hired with me, so I wasn't alone. Thankfully, Wadley provided us with a house while we got settled. I didn't have a car but quickly realized it was a necessity in Texas, so I bought my first; it was a baby blue Plymouth Valliant. For the first month living next to Wadley, I learned to live on Guy's Burgers. Later, I discovered Charcoal Broiler, Bryce's Cafeteria, Luby's, Catfish King and El Chico. After getting settled, I got an apartment in Wake Village with another new Wadley nurse named Fiona, from Scotland. I worked the night shift at Wadley for 18 months before joining Medical Arts Hospital, where I could work the day shift. It was Fiona who set me up on a blind date with Ray, who became my husband six months later, in November 1980, at Sacred Heart Catholic Church. Our son, Field, was born in 1983.

To make it all official, I passed the state boards for my Registered Nurse's license in Texas and also became a United States Citizen. We celebrated my new life with a Texas welcome party among many new friends. I miss my family in Ireland and usually return every year, but Texarkana is home.

It is a wonderful place to raise children. It is easy to travel from here to the mountains in Colorado, beaches in Florida and great shopping in Dallas. It's a great place!

The political turmoil in Ireland when I was growing up made me realize the importance of voting and being aware of politics. I always voted in the European Union and now in the U.S., and I look forward to having the opportunity again in November. The United States is an amazing place, and I'm so glad it's my home. 🇺🇸



# TexarkanaMonthly



ROTIMI IYUN

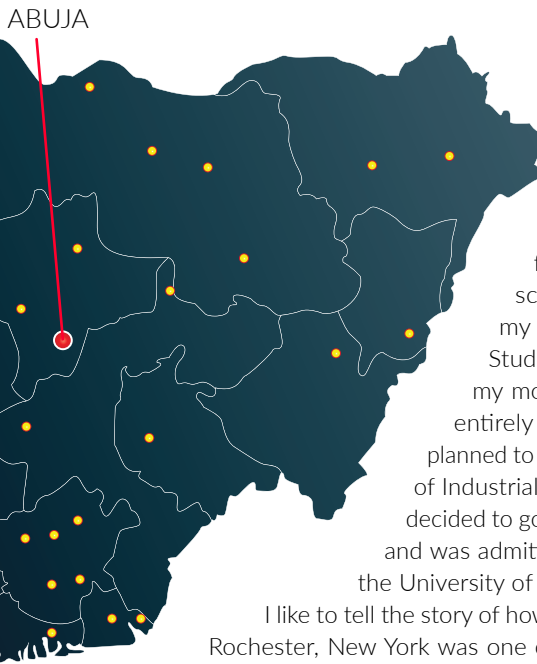


**NIGERIA  
TO  
TEXARKANA**

**6,398 MILES**

## MY NAME IS ROTIMI IYUN.

I was born in the hilly city of Ibadan in Oyo State, Nigeria—a large sprawling university city that was once the most populous city in the country. I spent most of my formative years in Ibadan, through high school and college and culminating in my first degree in Industrial Engineering. Studying Industrial Engineering was key to my move to the United States as it is almost entirely American in origin. For many years, I planned to come to the U.S. to pursue a dual Master of Industrial Engineering and Business. I eventually decided to go for a Master of Business Administration and was admitted to the Simon School of Business at the University of Rochester, New York.



I like to tell the story of how I read in the grad school brochure that Rochester, New York was one of the few places that fully experience all four seasons. I would later find out that there are only two seasons in Rochester—winter and construction. Post-graduation, I moved to New York City to start a job in consulting and be closer to family. After five years in New York, I made the decision to move to Texarkana where my sister had gotten a job.

The beautiful reserve of Texarkana was a welcome relief from the hustle and bustle of New York. I joined a great church called Church on the Rock, where I serve as part of the worship team. In Texarkana, I have also discovered a community of Africans and we even have a yearly African party where we celebrate our unique cultures and sample traditional food from various countries.

The beauty of living in a close-knit town like Texarkana is that you never know when you will run in to someone you know. I have learned to say hello to everyone even if I don't recognize them. I have fond memories of rushing through the airport, almost always the last person to go through security as I headed to work outside the city. The sometimes exasperated but always pleasant TSA staff at the Texarkana airport would smile and ask how I always seem to be able to time my arrival down to the last minute.

Living in Texarkana also makes for great conversation! I cannot tell you the number of people who try to sing me R.E.M.'s rock song "Texarkana," or tell me they have "only seen the signs" or "driven through" the town on I-30. I even met a flight attendant in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, who told me she grew up in Texarkana!

It has been twelve years since I left my home country and adopted the United States as my new home. I can truly say that God has been good to me. God bless the United States of America! 🇺🇸

# TexarkanaMonthly

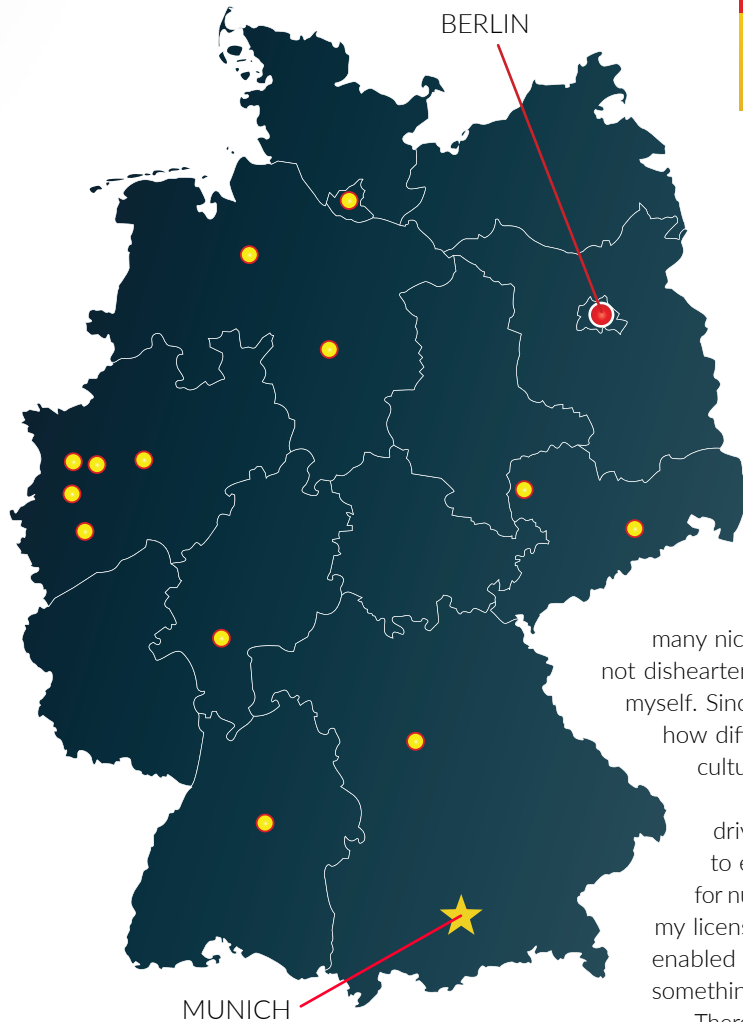


HEIKE SCHEMSEL-CRUZ



**GERMANY  
TO  
TEXARKANA**

**5,188 MILES**



## MY NAME IS HEIKE SCHEMSEL-CRUZ.

I was born and raised in East Germany. I attended ten years of school and then attended the University where I earned a degree in Electrical Engineering. In 1989, following the fall of the Berlin Wall, I moved to Munich. I met my husband, an American soldier, in 2006. We married and moved to the United States where I became a permanent resident. The news media in East Germany did not have many nice things to say about America, but this did not dishearten me. I was eager to find out the truth for myself. Since my arrival in the U.S., I have discovered how different this country is from Germany, both culturally and economically.

I began my "American life" as a service driver at a car dealership. Later, I endeavored to earn a formal education. I attended college for nursing and accounting, and ultimately, earned my license in Esthetics and Massage Therapy. This enabled me to open my own a business, which is something I never dreamed of in Germany.

There are no words that truly express how positive my life in the U.S. has been. After a rough start, that included self-learning the English language and understanding the social norms of America, I am happy. Many people in Germany come across as rude and without emotion. This is highlighted when compared to the many great first encounters I experienced with the people here.

Simply put, Texarkana is my second home. My husband's military assignment to Red River Army Depot brought me to Texarkana. After traveling the world to Korea, Bahrain, Europe, and East Asia, Texarkana is a great place to live. It is quiet but steady, and I have a beautiful home. What I really appreciate about life in Texarkana is that hard work pays off and people honor that. Everyone in this country has the opportunity to do the same.

It makes me sad what politicians and media say and write. It doesn't match my experience. Bottom line, I realize there are endless possibilities and opportunities when it comes to fulfilling your dreams here in the U.S.A. 🇺🇸



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*The matched amount will be deposited into the savings account at the end of each month.*



# TexarkanaMonthly



CHRIS GAVRIEL



# MY NAME IS CHRIS GAVRIEL

I was born in Cyprus, Greece, to a large typical Greek family that is extremely close. When I was only one, the war between Turkey and Greece broke out. My family's home was in the neutral zone of Cyprus and we were forced to move. While most of my family scattered and settled all over Greece and England, my parents moved our family to Waterloo, Ontario, Canada to open a restaurant with another couple.

Buffalo, New York was close to where I grew up, so I had early experiences visiting the United States when we would go for shopping and to watch baseball. Canada is where I grew up and completed high school. As an athlete I always wanted to play sports in the United States. My parents wanted me to have the opportunities that only the U.S. could afford, so both of them helped to make that happen. In 1994 I moved to Texarkana with a scholarship to play baseball for Texarkana College. I then moved to Dallas Baptist University, where I won a championship ring with my favorite teammates. I graduated from DBU with a degree in Kinesiology and Chemistry.

I met my wife Britany on my first day in Texarkana, and we were married ten months later. We made the decision to stay in the States after I completed school to allow our kids to grow up near my wife's family. That was an opportunity that I never had and missed growing up. I only got to see my family in Greece about once a year. My grandfather was the only pharmacist on the island of Cyprus. As a child, I thought I would pursue medicine because I wanted to be like him. It was always so hard to leave them when it was time to go back to Canada after each summer. Sadly, my grandparents passed away when I was in high school.

My family owns hotels all over Greece, which is a great perk for my kids because they can spend time there with their Godparents. My oldest son Peter has spent the last few summers there and proposed to his fiancé Autumn last year off the coast of Palaikastro, near Corfu. Peter was baptized there as a child, and my younger son Nicholas was baptized in the Orthodox church in Toronto. We hope to baptize our daughter Sophia in Corfu next summer. We want our kids to know the history of my Greek heritage, yet also teach



**GREECE  
TO  
TEXARKANA**

**6,642 MILES**

them about Christianity and how their grandparents lived on the same land where Jesus walked and talked to the Greeks. The kids are very close to my wife's parents here in the U.S. but can also FaceTime my father and other family members in Greece and England. We want to instill in them the importance of family near and far and both heritages they represent.

I lived in Texarkana while attending Texarkana College and we returned as a family in 2006. I feel like I am really a part of this community. I love our church and our pastor; I love our school and our coaches. We have both felt very blessed to find careers in this small town that we love, where we have raised two sons and now our daughter. Life is much faster here than in Greece and it is much more conservative than it was in Canada. My boys have had so many opportunities that they would not have had in my native countries. For example, I appreciate the fact that we had a praying coach while the boys were in school, who would still pray at football games. That is not allowed in Canada, and it is a freedom we take for granted in the United States. While I still have a Canadian passport, I have my Permanent Residency in the U.S. and am pursuing my U.S. Citizenship. As Christians, we have to do what we can to fight for our beliefs and fight to protect them, so now more than ever I look forward to having the right to vote in U.S. elections. <sup>TM</sup>

CYPRESS  
NEUTRAL ZONE



# TexarkanaMonthly



JESSICA PASTAKIA

# TexarkanaMonthly



BHAVIN PASTAKIA

VENEZUELA  
TO  
TEXARKANA  
  
2,336 MILES



## MY NAME IS JESSICA PASTAKIA.

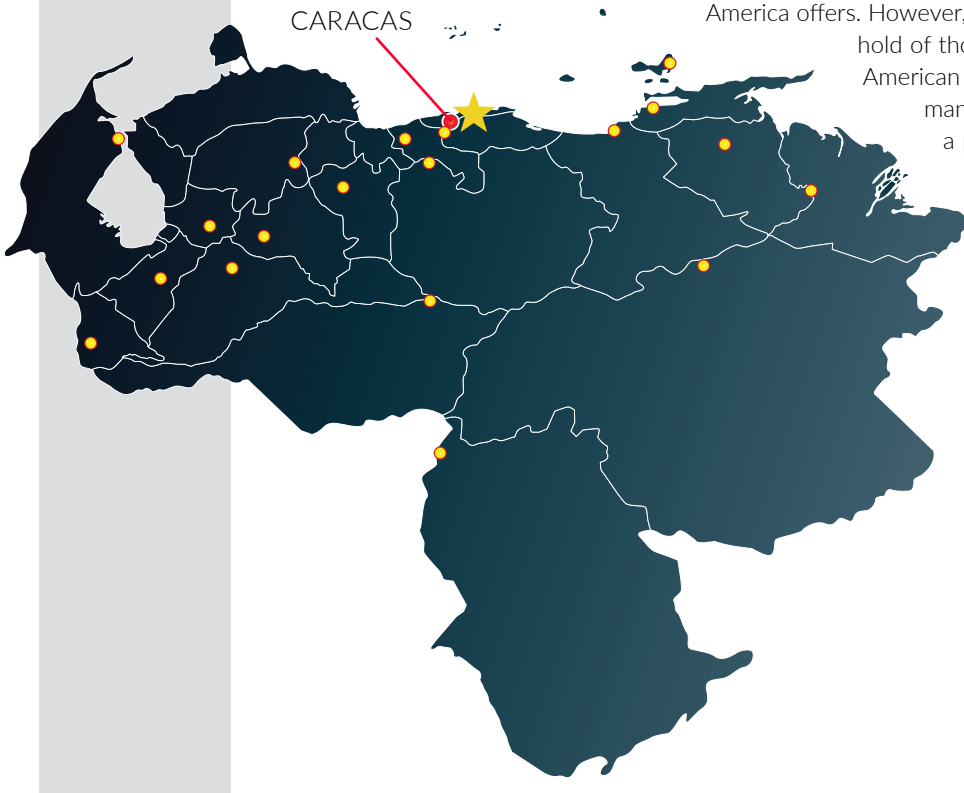
I was born in Caracas, Venezuela to parents originally from Perú. We immigrated to the United States in the late 1990s, seeking a safe environment, education, and financial stability through job opportunities. Venezuela was going through controversial presidential elections with a majority of its citizens protesting. Riots broke out and death rates were increasing because of them. Many lost their jobs, including my parents. They sought an opportunity to move to the United States and embarked on the journey to become citizens.

Before moving to the U.S., my family had visited, traveling to New York and Pennsylvania. I remember thinking this country had so many beautiful places to see and so many people from unique backgrounds and cultures. I was impressed! It was the city of Texarkana that saw me grow in most aspects of my life. I can now give back to this community and its surroundings. One of my favorite memories in the U.S. is when I first went to work gathering chicken eggs at a local chicken house. I got payed by the number of eggs gathered, so I worked hard. I remember having feathers all in my hair at the end of each day. It was then I learned that there is no job too hard when you have a goal in mind.

I recall crying myself to sleep when I could not do my homework because I couldn't read English very well. I spoke little to no English when we first arrived, but I overcame the language barrier with the help of my schoolteachers. They offered the English as a Second Language Program at my school, and it was the help I needed. After almost two years in the U.S., I could speak English fluently, and could read it and write it. I grew up in Prescott, Arkansas, and graduated from Prescott High School. I received a scholarship to attend college and was able to complete the Vocational Nursing Program at Texarkana College with perfect attendance. I completed my Associate of Science degree in Nursing at Texarkana College, and later, a bachelor's degree from Texas A&M University-Texarkana. I am currently seeking a Master of Science in Nursing degree. I am a Registered Nurse at Christus St. Michael Hospital. Caring for others has always been my goal, and this beautiful country has given me all the tools I need to do so.

If my parents had not moved to the United States, my life in Venezuela could have included going days without food, medical treatment, or education. I am beyond blessed to have had the tools

America offers. However, it also takes perseverance and tenacity to grab hold of those tools and pave the road toward making the American dream a reality. Practicing the right to vote, and many other rights that come with being a citizen, is a privilege that needs not be taken for granted. I look forward to continuing to represent my native country, and the country that has allowed me opportunities to grow proud, as an American,

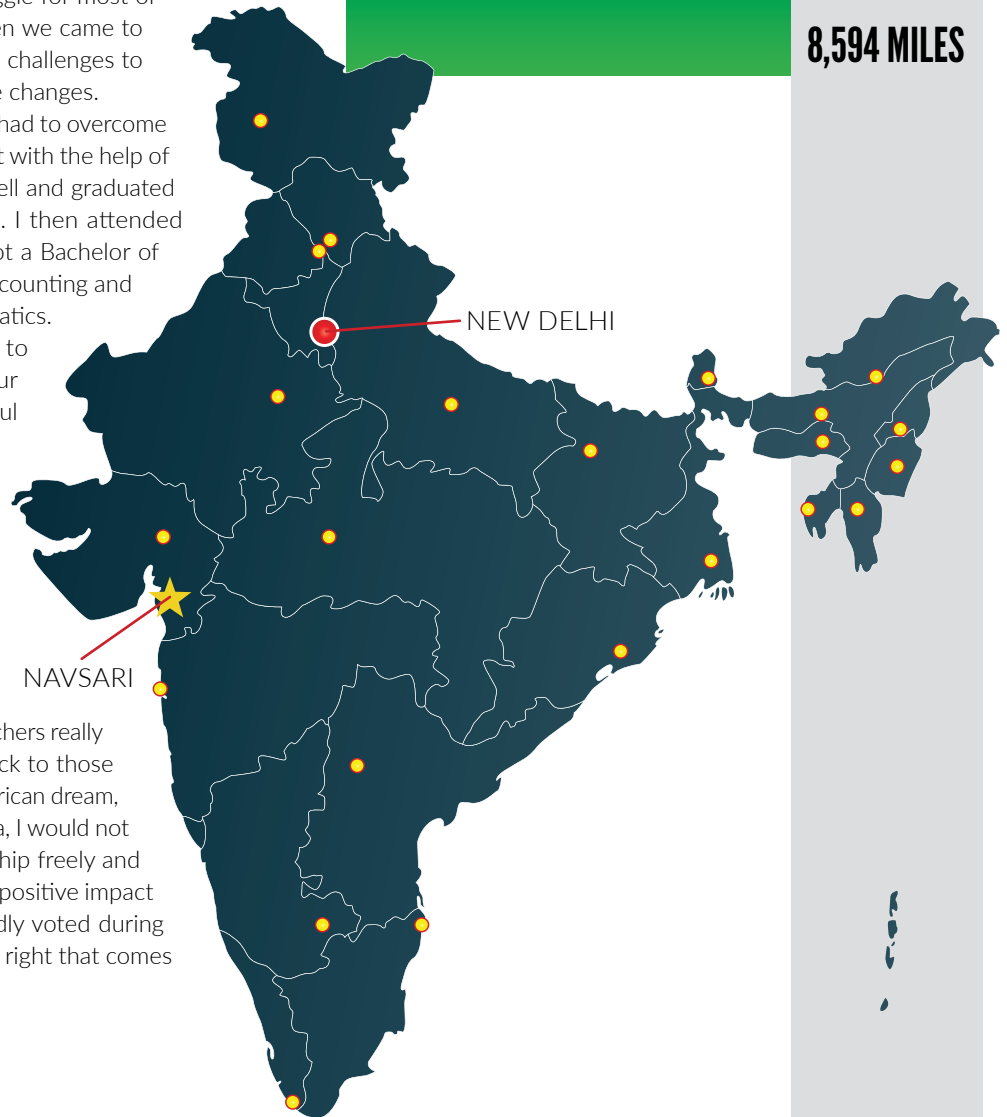
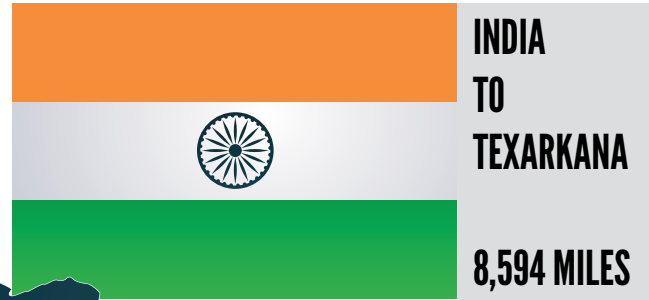


## MY NAME IS BHAVIN PASTAKIA.

I was born in India and immigrated with my parents and family in the early 1990s. My parents moved to the United States seeking a better education for me and my two siblings and greater opportunities for a brighter future. India is considered a third world country in which financial stability and access to education is a struggle for most of its citizens. Because I was only seven when we came to the U.S., I had very little knowledge of the challenges to come, including both culture and language changes.

I grew up in Little Rock, Arkansas, and had to overcome the language barrier. It was hard, but I did it with the help of outstanding teachers. I ended up doing well and graduated high school with a Science Magnet Seal. I then attended University of Central Arkansas, where I got a Bachelor of Business Administration with a major in accounting and risk management and a minor in mathematics. After meeting my wife Jessica, I moved to Texarkana. It was not only because of our relationship but also because of the powerful impact Church on the Rock has had on my spiritual life. The freedom to worship is one of the greatest blessings this country offers. I'm so thankful for it.

After years of serving as an accountant, I pursued teaching. Now, I am a mathematics teacher at Atlanta High School in Atlanta, Texas. Teaching has always been a dream of mine. I recall being a non-English-speaking student and my teachers really being there for me. It's my turn to give back to those children I represent, who also seek the American dream, because I am living it. If I had stayed in India, I would not have had the blessings to live freely, worship freely and be part of our education system, making a positive impact in the lives of many children. I have proudly voted during elections and will continue to practice this right that comes with being a United States citizen.



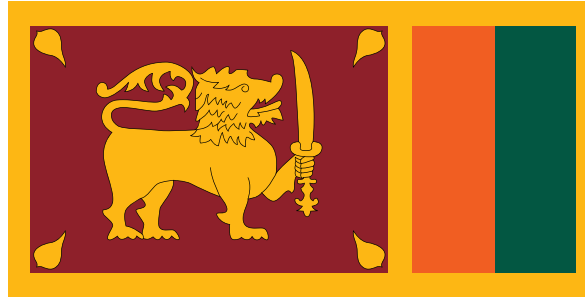
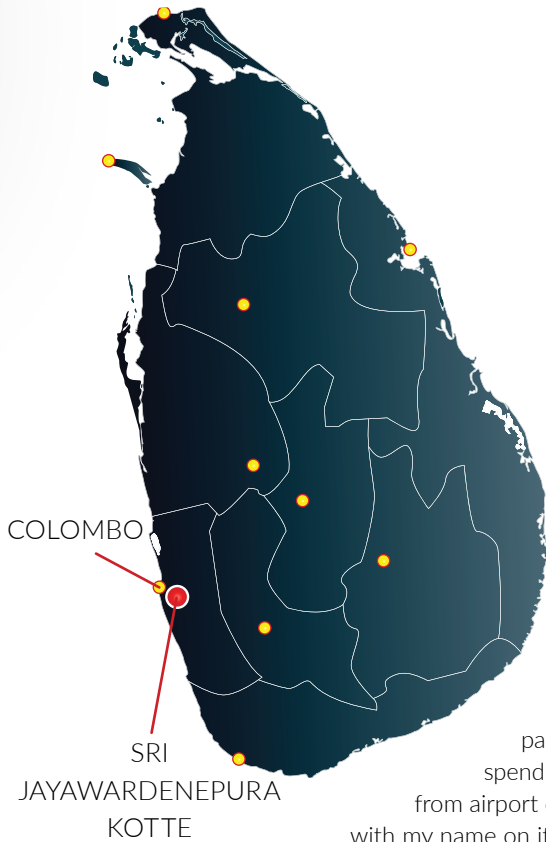
## OUR NAMES ARE JESSICA AND BHAVIN PASTAKIA.

The United States of America has given us both many blessings: each other, our children, our education and our freedom. Our love transcends the boundaries of landmasses and seas. It has overcome language barriers, nationalities and skin-deep differences. Making our families mesh and understand one another when coming from two different backgrounds, and joining that with the beauty that America offers, hasn't always been easy. However, we make it work. Serving in our community and trying to be proud and exemplary citizens, is how we want our children and future generations to live, and they can do that with freedom. <sup>TM</sup>

# TexarkanaMonthly



MANJULA CARTER



**SRI LANKA  
TO  
TEXARKANA**

**9,618 MILES**

## MY NAME IS MANJULA CARTER.

I was born in Sri Lanka, an island nation literally as far from the United States as you can get. When I was five years old, my parents emigrated to London, England where I lived until I was 21. Growing up in London, my exposure to American culture was mainly through American television shows like *Charlie's Angels* and *Dallas*, which portrayed Americans as glamorous and adventurous. I definitely wanted to see it for myself!

When given the opportunity to study abroad for a year as part of my degree program in England, I jumped at the chance to spend it at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville. I remember emerging from airport customs and my American roommate for the year holding a sign with my name on it. I was 19, in a new country with no friends or family and I was scared to death, but it ended up being the best year of my life! People were so friendly and welcoming, and life seemed to be at a much slower pace than in London. I ended my stay with a road trip across the U.S. from Dallas to New York, during which we stopped at South Fork, the ranch featured in the show *Dallas*. It was a surreal moment! I just fell in love with the country and the people, so when I graduated from my college in England, I returned to Fayetteville for my master's degree.

While completing my master's program, I met my husband Preston who is from Texarkana. When we got engaged, we had both graduated. He had moved to Michigan for a job and I was working in Fayetteville. Preston suggested that we get married in Texarkana since his family was there and could help with the wedding. I was skeptical—I knew nothing about Texarkana. However, once I saw the beautiful, old architecture of Beech Street First Baptist Church in downtown Texarkana, I fell in love with it. Of course, my favorite memory of Texarkana is getting married here.

After the wedding, I moved to Michigan with Preston for a year, but then we moved back to Texarkana in 1998 for his job. During this time, I applied for a Green Card and after that for citizenship. It was a long and arduous process. We had to submit photos, utility bills and all manner of documentation from family to show that we were indeed married and in a relationship! Finally, in 2003, I received my citizenship. It was a really proud moment to pledge my allegiance to the flag for the first time.

In 2007 Preston changed careers to become a dentist and we lived in Mississippi while he was in school. We returned to Texarkana in 2011. It seems like we can never stay away from Texarkana for long! It has been a great place to start a business and to raise a family. I would not have had the same career opportunities, or met my husband had I not moved to the U.S. I consider it an honor and a privilege to be able to live and vote here. 🇺🇸

# Texarkana Monthly



MARSHALL ALAM





**INDONESIA  
TO  
TEXARKANA**

**10,130 MILES**

**MY NAME IS MARSHALL ALAM.**

I was born in Jakarta, Indonesia. The only things I knew about America were from movies, television shows, and video games. They portray living in the United States, especially the big cities, as cool and easy.

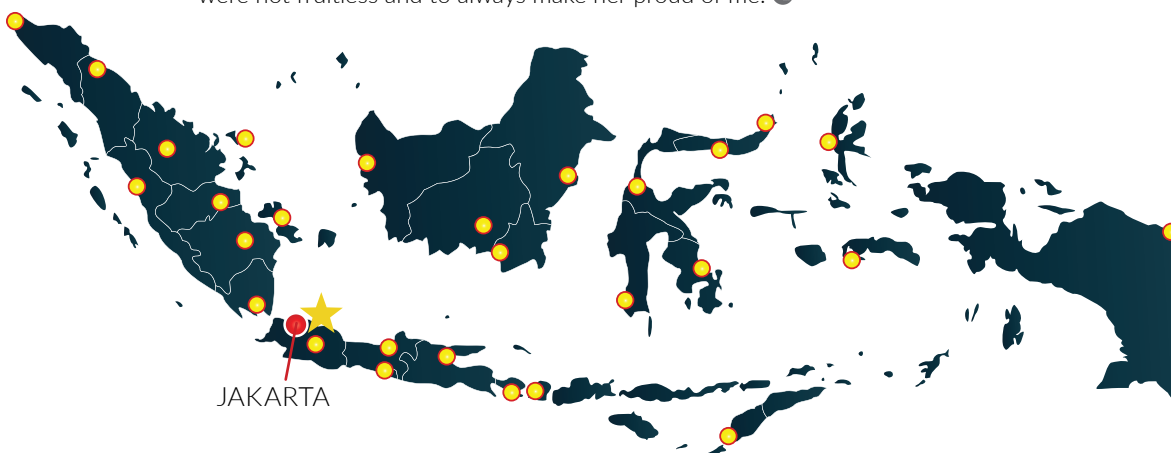
While the economy of Indonesia is steadily growing and there seem to be greater opportunities than in the past, my family was still barely getting by. My mother made the difficult decision to create change for my sister and me. She sponsored our green cards when I was in high school and we moved here soon after I graduated at 18 years old.

Unlike the movies and games portray, life is difficult, even in the U.S. Living expenses are high and there will always be challenging responsibilities and obligations, but the outlook and potential for success is far greater. It's for that reason that my mother was willing to take the risk of sending us to this unfamiliar country.

Shortly after arriving in the United States, I enlisted with the U.S. Air Force. I graduated from basic training and began my service and was excited about my future as a soldier. It was a life-changing experience. Unfortunately, not long into my service, I was discharged due to a disqualifying medical condition. I was disappointed. However, by becoming a member of the U.S. military, I also became a naturalized citizen. Fast-tracking the citizenship process is an opportunity I am very grateful for and I have the Air Force to thank.

I decided to enroll in Texarkana College, and I earned my associate degree with a major in computer technology and information systems. That along with training and experience has given me many opportunities for a career that I wouldn't have had in Indonesia. My life in the U.S. will be very different from the one I would have had living there. I get to experience a new culture and a different lifestyle. With the options created by better economic conditions, I'm even able to pursue my passion as a photographer.

For what my mother did for us, I will always be grateful. It was hard for all of us and she took an enormous risk so we could have a different life. I want to show her that her efforts were not fruitless and to always make her proud of me. <sup>TM</sup>



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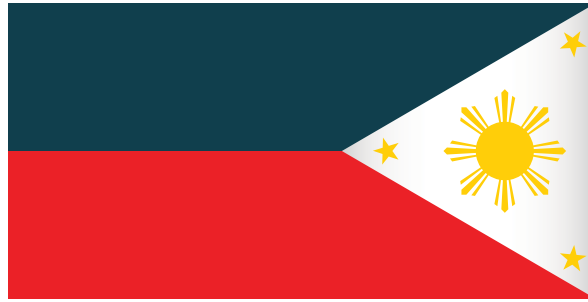
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# Texarkana Monthly



JOANNA AND RALPH  
GARLITOS



**PHILIPPINES  
TO  
TEXARKANA**

**8,406 MILES**

## MY NAME IS JOANNA GARLITOS.

I lived a simple, provincial life in Bacolod, Philippines, with my three older sisters and a younger brother. Growing up, our parents instilled the mantra, “You study hard so you can afford the finer things in life.” I became a physical therapist, with hopes of working abroad like my father.

He worked in several Asian countries as a Consultant Engineer for sugar plantations. We were fortunate to travel to other countries because of his job. My goal was to study hard, be able to come to the United States, earn money, and eventually, as good Asian children do, send it back to bless my parents, as they have done for me.

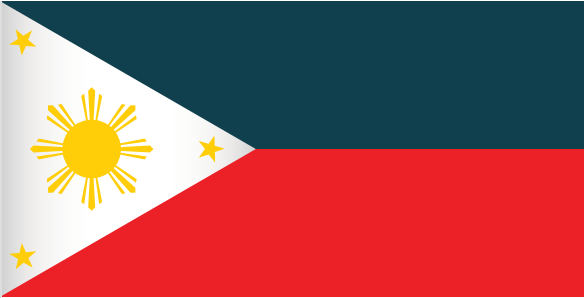
I was the fourth in my family among the five siblings to come to the United States. America is the land of opportunity. Since my three sisters were already residing in California, I thought nothing would really change. I could still depend on them. Soon, I realized I was wrong; everything changed. Once I got my work visa, I was assigned to work in Texas, far away from my sisters. How would I do this on my own? When my company provided free housing, grocery allowance, and a down payment for a vehicle I needed, I was very thankful!

Even though my siblings were in the U.S., they were in another state. I still felt lonely. I was only 22 years old when I left my parents and began adjusting to a new culture. However, if I had been with my sisters in California, I wouldn't have learned to depend on God. My faith grew and I learned that if you rely on God, He will direct your path. I also realized that if you work hard in the United States, you can be successful.

My husband, Ralph, and I met briefly in college in the Philippines. After both moving to the U.S., somehow, God allowed our paths to cross again. We traveled together to different parts of Texas to work. We later settled in Texarkana, USA.

**PHILIPPINES  
TO  
TEXARKANA**

**8,406 MILES**



## MY NAME IS RALPH GARLITOS.

I am the first person from my family to come to the United States. I was born in Manila, Philippines, but spent my teenage years in Cebu, Philippines. When I was young, I saw America as the land of opportunity, wealth, and prosperity.

Following my father's advice, I became a physical therapist, and came to the United States with a work visa. Originally, I wanted to become a medical doctor, but things didn't go as planned. I had the choice to work in Texas or Florida, but there were more job openings in Texas. I wanted to see real cowboys, so Texas was my choice.

My first year in the U.S. was hard. Imagine being 22 years old, fresh out of college, and living in a foreign country. I was lonely and culture shocked. I was away from my family and could only get in touch with them through letters or the phone, but long-distance calls were expensive. I was unsure of the future and alone, but in the midst of it all, I knew God was in control!

My knowledge of the U.S. was based on what they portrayed on television and in textbooks. You don't learn American culture and the traditions from books. You learn from experience. Over time, you meet new people and start developing friendships. I remember spending Christmas in Arkansas. I thought I would be alone, but American co-workers started inviting me to spend Christmas with them; it was blissful. We have that connection in Texarkana, where we are thankful for our church family, Church on the Rock, who welcome us with open arms.

I traveled across Texas and to parts of Arkansas before meeting back up with Joanna for the first time since college. We traveled together for work and found ourselves in Texarkana where we were offered permanent jobs. After earnestly praying, we left the nomadic life, got married, and started our family in this great city. We have been in Texarkana since 1995.



## OUR NAMES ARE JOANNA AND RALPH GARLITOS.

Joanna and I gained our U.S. citizenship status after completing all the legal requirements. Our parents and siblings are also U.S. citizens, but are scattered throughout California and Minnesota. We still have relatives in the Philippines and visit as often as possible.

We are thankful that we can enjoy the freedom and opportunities available to us as U.S. citizens. Being able to vote and be heard, and the freedom to worship God and be with other believers, are opportunities to cherish. We are thankful that God has blessed us here in the U.S. and that we can share some of those blessings with our family in the Philippines.

Having spent most of our lives in the United States, we feel like we are part of the American dream. We have assimilated and mingled our own native Filipino heritage with the American culture. We are proud to have a daughter that is both American and Filipino at heart. We are proud to live in a country where the ideals are of Christian origin. We still believe in this country. God bless America! 🇺🇸

# WELCOME HOME!



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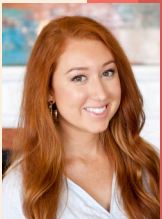
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