



Forced to Move to Canada to Stay Together A Profile of Charles Zhang and Wayne Griffinⁱ

Charles Zhang met Wayne Griffin over the Internet in 1998. Charles was very impressed that the New Hampshire native fluently communicated using “Ping Yin,” Chinese words written with English letters. Wayne had spent several years in China as a missionary and a teacher. They decided to meet up in New York City where Charles, a native of the Chinese province, Hainan, was living under an H1-B work visa. Charles was excited to find a friend who understood his culture and language and when they met, “It didn’t take me very long to realize this was the person with whom I wanted to spend my time and share my life.”

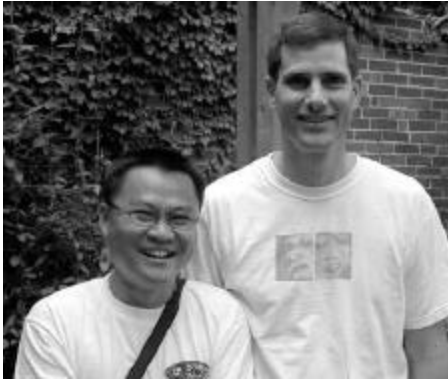
Wayne decided to leave his home and family in New Hampshire to move to New York. He found a job as a training manager on Wall Street and in February 1999 the couple moved in together. “We were so overjoyed by our relationship that we spent weeks painting and decorating our new home,” says Wayne. “We thought life from then on would be ‘happily ever after.’”

The couple was determined to stay together and expected to be able to do so because Charles’ boss had sponsored him for a green card. Unfortunately he also began adding more and more responsibilities to Charles’ already overwhelming workload. The situation was becoming unsustainable, as Charles was supposed to be managing two separate and unrelated departments: shipping and credit. Each day he considered quitting, but stayed on in the hopes the situation would work out. He then discovered from an attorney that the amount he was getting paid was just one half to a third of what his job title required and so his green card application was unlikely to be approved.

The sole route Charles and Wayne had to staying in the United States together was quickly becoming infeasible. “I realized it was almost impossible to go on like that,” Charles says. When Charles initially came to the United States, he did not come to stay long term. “I used to be a college teacher in China and I had a good life, good income and respect,” says Charles. “The only reason I decided to stay was I felt I was more free as a gay person. After I met Wayne I became more determined to stay in the states. I wanted to live with him.” They were quickly feeling more and more hopeless. They wrote hundreds of letters to congress people and senators but got no response. In the summer of 1999, Wayne and Charles saw a flyer from the Lesbian and Gay Immigration Rights Task Force. The couple contacted the group about their predicament and the group suggested they pursue moving to Canada. After looking into it, the couple decided that Charles, who had more education and so would be more likely to qualify under Canada’s point system, should apply first. The couple then contacted a lawyer who had previously worked for Canadian immigration. She recommended that Wayne also apply and they send a letter explaining their relationship.

In April of 2000, Charles finally quit his job and returned to school, even though they had not yet heard about their applications. In August they received letters inviting them for interviews at the end of October. Charles and Wayne took great care in preparing for their interviews, practicing answers to various questions and dressing appropriately. Their lawyer said they should have no problems. Everyone was very optimistic. Unfortunately, the couple was interviewed by an infamously difficult immigration agent. She quickly told Charles that he did not have the appropriate job qualifications,

even before he had described the work he had done. Wayne's interview was even more brief. "That was the darkest day of our lives," says Charles. "We became numb. We didn't know what to do."



Fortunately, their lawyer—who was shocked by their treatment—recommended they write an account of their experience that she forwarded to the Consulate General. Their applications were approved two weeks later.

Wayne quit his job and the couple moved to Toronto in February of 2001. Though they are pleased to have legal status that allows them to stay together without fear of expiring visas and deportation, the transition has not been easy for them. Both of them have made significant sacrifices, not the least of which was moving away from Wayne's family and starting from scratch in rebuilding their careers. After over a year and a half of frustration in the employment arena in Toronto, Charles and Wayne have decided to start a photography and video business together.

Discrimination has been a significant impediment for the couple. "I hate to say this," says Charles, "but it is probably true that because I'm Asian, it's been much harder for me to find a job—even survival jobs at hotels and coffee shops. Wayne and I would both walk in together and Wayne was the only one to ever get called back. At job fairs, people would talk to Wayne, giving him suggestions. I never got anything." Charles only had one informational interview in his field. It was going very well until the interviewer asked Charles if his wife was working. "I was honest with him," Charles says, telling the interviewer of his relationship with Wayne. "His face changed right then and that was the end of it."

Of their situation, Wayne says, "It feels very strange to have to leave a country that is supposed to be a leader in human rights... The last time I did my taxes I felt a lot of anger. I was forced to pay for a government that would rather have me leave than help me to keep my family together. When I think about trying to work with my own country to obtain rights that I should have, I feel that it would be more useful to try and push a mountain into the sea with my bare hands."

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ⁱ Source: Cahill, S., Ellen, M., & Tobias, S. (2002). *Family Policy: Issues Affecting Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Families*. New York: National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute. Available at <http://www.thetaskforce.org/library/familypolicy.htm>