

# stamford advocate

## **Opinion: U.S. immigration system puts long pause on a CT love story**

By Isaac Mukwaya

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When my daughter Letitia was born on April 11, 2021, I wasn't there to greet her. I'd done everything in my power to make it happen — sought help from lawyers and even appealed to the U.S State Department. But when my fiancé Sarah went into labor, I was thousands of miles away in Kenya, barred from entering the United States. Why? Because of the delays in the American immigration system. Cases like ours rarely make the news, but they affect many families and cause needless suffering for Americans and their loved ones.

Sarah is an American citizen, and I am a Kenyan national. We first met in 2017, while working with the Africa Yoga Project. I was teaching yoga in Nairobi when Sarah arrived as a volunteer and we stayed in touch loosely for the coming year. To our surprise we saw each other a year and a half later and then kept crossing paths. With hesitation due to the distance and our different backgrounds, we fell in love. We started a long-distance relationship late 2018. In 2019 I visited her on a tourist visa and Sarah returned to visit me. We got engaged in October 2019. Five months later, Sarah was visiting Nairobi when the pandemic began. She became trapped in the country for seven months, but happily so. Our relationship flourished, and in August 2021, we learned we'd be having a baby.

One month later, the Kenyan government ordered anyone with an overdue visa to leave the country. Sarah had no choice but to return home to Connecticut. I had no choice but to stay. Trying to follow all rules, we had applied for a K-1 visa — also called a fiancé visa — many months before. When we applied in February we assumed we'd be together in the United States by September at the very latest. But by starting my K-1 process it nullified my existing tourist visa — and prevented me from getting a new one. If I tried to travel with my existing tourist visa, even to be with my fiancé for the birth of our daughter, it would be considered fraud, and I'd never be allowed back into the United States.

We had compiled more than 100 pages over multiple applications documenting our relationship. It included our text messages, emails, photos, and statements from all of Sarah's family members. There have been many fees associated with this process, which is tough on a young family just starting out. Still, we were hopeful that the visa would be approved before our daughter was born. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services estimated five to seven months. Over a year later, we were still waiting.

I remember when Sarah called to say that she was in labor. We were both nervous, excited, and determined to support each other, even though there was an ocean and thousands of miles between us. I felt afraid as I held my phone and listened and watched my wife in labor. And then I remember squinting back tears to see my daughter for the first time, wishing I could hold her. Letitia was almost 3 months old when my K-1 visa was finally approved — 1 year and 4 months after we had submitted the application.

I arrived in the United States on Father's Day 2021. Our airport reunion felt like it was created by Hollywood. My heart grew bigger when I held her for the first time. I felt overcome with joy to be reunited with my love, and my family. Sarah and I married soon after in July 2021.

We aren't alone in our predicament. Roughly [1.6 million people are currently waiting for their green cards. They spend](#) an average of five years in this so-called "line." But there's no order to it. The regulations are different for every person depending on their nationality and profession. For many Indian and Chinese nationals who work in STEM fields, [the wait is more than a century](#), according to the Cato Institute. The pandemic and Trump era policies to decrease legal immigration exacerbated the problem because immigration offices were operating at reduced capacity. We are grateful many of those policies have been repealed and we received my green card quicker than expected, in May 2022.

Sarah, Letitia and I revel in the blessing of being together every day. After years of timing our conversations around time zones, checking immigration statuses and calling senators and lawyers daily; drying each others tears through the phone, we are physically together. Nowhere to go, no petitions or phone calls to be made, no fees to pay, no more waiting for an unknown day when we'll be together.

Words can't describe the relief and gratitude we feel every day to be in the same place. To be able to care for both my wife and daughter through my cooking, my drumming and my love, and now that I have my green card and can work, very soon I'll be able to contribute financially.

It is our wish that every other family can experience the unmatched feeling of being reunited and finally living together freely. We advocate for faster immigration processing and systems that prioritize family reunification.

*Isaac Mukwaya is a yoga instructor originally from Kenya. He lives in Connecticut with his wife Sarah Hill and their daughter Letitia.*