

RESIDENCY AND CITIZENSHIP

“The Long Road to Citizenship”

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By Robert Carry

“YOU HAVE to get references, clearances from the gardaí, get your identification verified and notarised by a solicitor, fill out forms, and then you submit your application,” says Marie McPeak, a Californian native who is about to get the ball rolling on her bid to secure citizenship in the country where she has lived for the past seven years.

McPeak came to Ireland via the UK in April 2002, initially for a four-month period, but she settled quickly and soon decided that Ireland was somewhere she would like to stay long-term. She secured employment in a travel agency, which helped her to remain in Ireland through the work permit system.

However, the lack of flexibility in that system (visas are tied to individual employers) became a sticking point.

“It is frustrating more than anything because I’ve stayed in the same job since I first arrived in Ireland in part because it’s tied to my work permit. It’s hard to take risks and you can’t freely move amongst employers,” she says.

Residency didn’t come quickly for McPeak. She recalls: “I had to wait until July of last year for residency – I applied for it in August 2007.”

McPeak is regularly reminded of one of the key advantages of citizenship when returning from trips to the US.

“Because I don’t have Irish citizenship I have to come in through the ‘non-EU’ line and that can be a lengthy wait sometimes.”

Although ease of travel is one factor, there is a whole range of other reasons why McPeak feels citizenship is a goal worth pursuing.

“For most people who apply, I think their main motivation is the freedom it gives you to move around the EU,” she says. “You don’t have to worry about visas so much and obviously you can work anywhere.

“For me personally, though, I see it as a kind of right. I have lived here for a long time and I intend to stay here permanently. It’s much better for me to have citizenship rather than having to renew a residency visa every five years.”

Although McPeak’s surname may hint at Celtic origins, she has no immediate family here. However, she feels she has carved out a life for herself in Ireland.

“I don’t have family here but I have a lot of really close friends and they are like my surrogate family. I also have a boyfriend here and we have been together for quite a long time.”

Although open to the idea of working abroad, for McPeak, Ireland has become home.

She adds: “I’m firmly entrenched here. I would consider moving on if there were better opportunities elsewhere but I love it here and I don’t really have any intention of leaving on a permanent basis.

“Even if I did go and work elsewhere for a while, I think I would always come back to Ireland.”

For the time being, the wait is on to see if the US-born Wicklow resident will ultimately be granted citizenship in her adopted country. But even if she does receive a letter from the Department of Justice stating that her application has been accepted, there are still further steps to be taken.

“You have to take an oath to the Irish State as part of a ceremony,” says McPeak. “There is also a fee involved in getting over the final hurdle and receiving your actual passport.”

Until then, the process of becoming Irish – independent of bureaucratic approval – will continue. As McPeak points out: “When I am here people say I am American, but every time I go home people say I am Irish!”

FOR THOSE who come from developing countries, applying for Irish citizenship is a rite of passage for almost every one of them. And it’s the opportunities and security that citizenship brings that makes the drawn-out process worthwhile.

Ernest Bishop from Sierra Leone can tell you all about that. Having lived in Ireland for six years, Bishop is thoroughly involved with the local community and is a strong advocate for equality and anti-racism. He is coordinator of both the Galway City Anti-Racism Strategy and of Community Development at Galway City Partnership.

Bishop talks regularly to groups about the issues of diversity and equality, and the importance of implementing more initiatives than are presently set out by the Equality Authority.

With a background in accountancy, he has previously worked in Doras Luimni as a finance/outreach worker and was chair of Integrating Ireland from 2003 to 2005. Five months ago, he applied for citizenship.

“I am settled here and want to live a natural, normal life,” he says of why he decided to apply. “You have more rights as a citizen.”

The procedure so far has been straightforward, he notes. “I got the forms from the Citizens Information Centre; anyone can go in there and request information. I filled them out and got them signed. You need a few Irish references, for example employers or people in the local community.

“I’m not sure what the next step will be,” he adds. “I’m just waiting to hear from them.”

Additional reporting by Sarah Freeman

‘What’s the process?’

The supporting documents required for a citizenship application include evidence of identity and nationality (long- form birth certificate and pass- port, national identity card or travel document) and, if married, a marriage certificate.

Applicants must also produce documents relating to their status and the duration of their stay in the State (Garda registration, declaration of refugee status, work permit or the like).

If an application for naturalisation is based on a relation- ship to an Irish citizen, the applicant needs to produce the documents to show that person’s status and the relationship to that person (such as their birth certificate).

As well as these, applicants must produce documents relevant to their financial and employment status (payslips and bank statements for the previous three months) and confirmation of their income tax situation.

Applications must be witnessed before they are signed. The instructions as to who can be a witness are noted on the form itself.

The receipt of application and accompanying documentation is normally acknowledged within 15 working days. Forms completed incorrectly are returned to the applicant for resubmission.

When an application is accepted, applicants are given a reference number which should be quoted when making queries either by phone or in writing.

Applications are processed on a first come, first served basis. On average, applications are taking 22 months – almost two years – to process.

As soon as the Minister for Justice has made a decision on an application, the applicant will be informed by registered post.

When the minister approves an application, the letter notifying of this decision will contain instructions regarding final procedures that must be completed prior to the issue of a certificate of naturalisation. These include swearing an oath of fidelity to the nation and loyalty to the State (usually done before a judge of the District Court).

On finalisation of the appropriate procedures, a certificate of naturalisation will normally be issued within 30 days.

Successful applicants are Irish citizens with effect from the date of issue of the certificate, and can apply to the Department of Foreign Affairs for an Irish passport any time after that date.

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