

**Tripler Army Medical Center
Public Affairs Office News Release**

For Immediate Release
Release Number 04-049

Contact: Tripler Public Affairs Office, 808-433-5785
Sept. 8, 2004

Patriotic Doctor yearns for U.S. Citizenship

**by Margaret Tippy
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HONOLULU—Dr. Anton C. Nicolescu is a passionate physician who has a history of doing everything the hard way – not because he wanted to – but because that’s what life presented to him.

The elegant Romanian who works at Tripler Army Medical Center and the Veterans Affairs Pacific Islands Health Care System at Tripler says smiling “I feel very American as I don’t take freedom for granted.”

His dream is to become an American citizen after escaping from Romania in early 1990, ending up in jail in Sweden and a refuge camp during his odyssey, eventually making it to Palau with the help of his faith and church, marrying his Palauan wife, Kezia, and now being the proud father of two boys.

In between, he was present in New York during the suicide terrorists’ attack and destruction of the World Trade Center in 2001 and now is living happily in Hawai’i.

This is his life story.

He went to medical school in Romania but “there was no freedom to advance or to move anywhere. The medical profession was a way to survive intellectually under an oppressive regime while helping my fellow countrymen in a tangible way. ... We weren’t allowed passports so I couldn’t even go to Bulgaria, can you imagine?”

Nicolae Ceausecu, the “leader of Romania” described in history as the “megalomaniac Communist dictator of Romania for 25 years,” was tried and executed for his crimes Dec. 25, 1989. His policies held Nicolescu to “marginal jobs based on what I had accomplished professionally.”

He received training in Anesthesiology in Romania.

Nicolescu felt “... a breeze of freedom coming from Poland and some of the other countries (around).”

Nicolescu wanted freedom. “When you are in a Communist country, the state owns everything. There is no private sector, no competition.”

During the political turmoil of early 1990, he crossed into Hungary knowing he had a friend there. He had no way back to Romania as repression was expanding. Sweden was his next destination and he had to pass through Czechoslovakia and Poland on the way there – all without proper traveling documents.

“I reached the Baltic Sea just trying to survive – sleeping in railroad stations or wherever,” Nicolescu said. “Finally, I got on a ferry boat to Copenhagen and then made it to Sweden.

He surrendered to the police at the border, was interrogated and got thrown in the city jail waiting for his case to come up. He chose Sweden because it was the only country that responded to his request for political asylum. Eventually, Nicolescu ended back in Denmark in a Refugee Camp.

Denmark is a very small country that can only absorb so many refugees, he explained, so it is a very long process. His stay lasted more than a year. While paperwork was being processed – even though he was a doctor – he was not allowed to work, which “is professional suicide,” he said.

One of his interests was being a missionary physician. His faith has gotten him through incredibly hard times. Nicolescu is a Seventh Day Adventist – and he ended up pursuing this avenue to eventually get to the United States - flying from Copenhagen to Guam to Palau.

“I’m one of the few Europeans who came to the United States not by crossing the Atlantic but by crossing the Pacific,” he said smiling.

In Palau in 1991, he “hit the ground running” and opened up a new clinic. He didn’t know a soul and he describes himself as “lost somewhere in the South Pacific” laughing.

Nicolescu began brushing up on his English. A year and a half went by. One of his first patients was the High Chief Ibedul, who was a member of his church. He befriended Nicolescu and began teaching him about the local culture.

“He actually introduced me to the woman who became my wife,” Nicolescu said. After they got married, he decided to go back through the entire medical system and take his U.S. Medical Licensing Exam. Medicine is Nicolescu’s passion and he received extremely high scores.

He gathered letters of recommendation from the physicians he was working with and ended up at Loma Linda University Center in California, which is part of the Seventh Day Adventist Church.

He started having immigration problems – his medical qualifications were fine – but Immigration had issues with his employment status.

Dr. Daniel Bouland, the VA’s current assistant chief of staff for Primary Care in Honolulu assisted Nicolescu. Nicolescu’s father-in-law who was the president of Palau, had connections with a friend of Senator John McCain who spent six years as a Prisoner Of War (POW) with McCain. McCain helped Nicolescu with his employment authorization status.

While all this was going on, he and his wife, Kezia, had two sons – Philip born in 1992, and, Cristian born in 1994.

He finished his Internal Medicine Residency at Loma Linda in 1997 and was accepted by the University of Pittsburgh for a fellowship in Critical Care Medicine. He was four months into the program when he had to leave based on the decision of the Deportation and Detention Branch of U.S. Immigration. As he said, “I accomplish everything through the hard way.”

He ended up in Guam practicing medicine at Guam Memorial Hospital from 1997 to 1998. Guam has a shortage of specialists and is considered an underserved area.

He then came back to the U.S. Mainland, started his fellowship in Pennsylvania again and finished in 2000.

Nicolescu then went to work at North Shore University Hospital, New York University/Cornell and was there Sept. 11, 2001, ready to receive casualties being so close to Ground Zero. It was an extremely stress-filled environment.

His wife wanted to live closer to her homeland after the terrorist attacks. Nicolescu said he had always enjoyed taking care of veterans and he was attracted to this patient population. His father was from the “older generation” of military officers in Romania and fed his passion for history.

Nicolescu interviewed for the clinical position in Hawai’i in the fall of 2001, and moved his family here. He now works with a team of critical care specialists – from Tripler through a joint venture with the VA – providing medical care to inpatients.

He continues to maintain high scores in medical proficiency. Nicolescu’s most recent annual Proficiency Report had “Outstanding” marks in all areas of Clinical Competence.

He also received a faculty appointment with the University of Hawai’i as an assistant clinical professor, and was inducted as a fellow of the American College of Chest Physicians (F.C.C.P.) – the ultimate prestigious honor in his profession.

His hope for American citizenship is almost a reality – though he’s gotten through the hard way once again. After Sept. 11th, immigration rules were changed and it has taken much longer than anticipated to work through the system. He initially applied in November 2002 so it’s been a long wait.

“Don’t forget your past,” Nicolescu said. He travels with his family wanting them to understand their European heritage as well as their Palauan culture.

“Exploring new cultures is fascinating,” he said.

He allowed his story to be told hoping to inspire others. “If you **really** want something and you dream, it will come true sometimes,” Nicolescu said.

Now he dedicates himself to teaching and working with what he calls the “high professionals” at Tripler - Lt. Col. Joseph Pina, chief of Pulmonary and Critical Care, Col. Benjamin Berg, chief of the Directorate of Health, Education & Training, Maj. Eric Crawley, Intensive Care Unit (ICU) director, and Maj. Peter Heetderks, of the Internal Medicine Residency Program. His VA partner physician is Dr. Philip Bruno who is triple boarded in Internal Medicine, Pulmonary and Infectious Diseases. “They are really good (physicians),” Nicolescu said.

“Tony has a compassionate and caring approach to the sickest patients and their families,” Berg said. “He is a role model for both younger and more experienced physicians, and I am very lucky that he is a colleague.”

Nicolescu owes much of his success to what he calls “divine protection.”

“I have great job satisfaction,” he said, “taking care of the sickest of the Military Veteran, Retiree and Active Duty population of the United States. It is a great position of trust. It also gives me the opportunity serve the Pacific Islanders referred to Tripler, particularly the people of Palau, whom I have deep affection for.

“I am really enthusiastic (about) being a part of the ICU Team,” Nicolescu said smiling. “Together

we started the ‘Fundamentals of Critical Care Support Course’ – the only course of its kind offered in the state of Hawai’i, and work closely with the eICU at Guam Navy Hospital.”

His future plans include creating a Palliative Care Service and Multi-Disciplinary Simulation Center for teaching purposes.

Nicolescu continues to be a shining beacon devoted to his faith and willing to go the extra distance to make sure his patients are receiving the best care possible. America welcomes him as an outstanding citizen.



Last updated: Friday November 21 2014

Comments or suggestions to the [Public Affairs Officer](#)

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