

Student takes flight for education

By Sally Bauer, Enid, Okla.

Bags checked and armed with a student visa, passport and airplane ticket, she stands in line to board the plane that will bring her to America. The only thing missing: her husband and two young children.

Brenda Tubaña was born and raised in San Pablo City, Philippines, to Myrnaflor and Bernabe Sr. Servaz on Nov. 9, 1971.

She attended the University of the Philippines Los Baños and received her Bachelor of Science in agriculture in 1992. Three years after graduating, she was hired as a researcher at the International Rice Research Institute. During her employment at IRRI, she pursued a master's in soil science on a part-time assistantship. She received her master's from the University of the Philippines Los Baños in 2002.

"She is very hard working," said her husband, Edwin Tubaña. "She is very smart."

In 2004, Tubaña decided to continue her education and earn a doctorate. At the time, IRRI was not offering a part-time assistantship for a doctorate, and she knew traveling abroad for her degree would be the best choice.

"I had a better chance of getting a job in my country if I studied in the United States," Tubaña said.

With a click of the mouse, she used the Internet to search for the particular university and doctoral program she wanted.

In her search, she found Oklahoma State University and Bill Raun, a regents' professor in the plant and soil sciences department. She sent Raun a letter asking about possibly attending school at OSU. He sent her a reply to offer her an assistantship.

"I had to offer her an assistantship," Raun said. "Her background was amazing."

With acceptance in the bag, she started to dream about and plan for the new experience. Tubaña received the name of another international student who would help her find a place to live in Stillwater. Adele Tongco, coordinator of international programs



The Tubañas enjoy living in Oklahoma: Brenda (front left), Edwin, Elasia and Casiano. (Photo by Sally Bauer)

in agriculture for the OSU College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources, gave her e-mail addresses of fellow Filipino students to see if they needed a short-term roommate. Tubaña found a roommate who was a perfect match.

"It worked out perfectly," Tubaña said.

To obtain a student visa, Tubaña had to present an employment certificate from IRRI, vehicle registration, savings account information, an I-20 issued by the International Students and Scholars, passport and, most importantly, her admission letter from OSU. The last step was an interview inquiring what Tubaña would be doing while in the United States. Once the interview was completed, she knew she could go to the United States to study.

"I knew then; I just had to wait for my visa," Tubaña said. "It takes about a week for it to come by courier."

She arrived in the United States in January 2004 when most Oklahomans are settling into the winter weather. Tubaña was coming from a country where the low temperatures reached only 65 degrees.

"I would wear three layers of clothes with gloves, a bonnet and scarf, and I would still be cold," Tubaña said.

The first eight months of her assistantship required Tubaña to be without her family. International students are required to show they have enough funding to financially support their families to come to the United States. She decided to take three months vacation before filing her resignation because she was unsure she would be able to adjust and wanted to keep her job at IRRI.

"The first two weeks were the worst," Tubaña said. "I overcame or became adjusted after three months."

Tubaña said she took advantage of technology to keep in touch with her family. They talked daily using a Web cam, where they could see each other during conversations. It was not as easy as it sounds. Although technology has the ability to let you see and hear someone thousands of miles away, it cannot freeze time. Time zones in the United States and the Philippines are at least 13 hours apart.

"There were many times I had to stay up until one or two in the morning so I could talk to them, watch them grow," she said.

Tubaña saved all the money she could from her assistantship and part of her IRRI retirement fund to pay for her family to join her eight months after she left for the United States.

"It took us a while, and Edwin had a job at home," Tubaña said.

Her two children, 13-year-old Elasia and 12-year-old Casiano, were excited to be with their mom again. It was the first time on a plane for both children. The flight was an exciting yet nerve-wrecking experience, Elasia Tubaña said.

Once in the United States, the children adjusted quickly, but that was not quite the case for Edwin Tubaña. The children were sleeping through the night and did not suffer from "jet lag." His internal clock, however, took many weeks to adjust. Going to school might have helped the children since they had little to no time at all off, Brenda Tubaña said.

"They arrived on a Tuesday, and I had to enroll them on Wednesday," she said. "They were in [class] their first day the following Monday."

Tubaña said she was excited to start being a mom again. She cooks all the traditional foods from her country, such as fish and rice. She helps the children with any homework problems they encounter since

she can speak English. The schools in the Philippines teach academic English, such as how to write or read, but it is not common to speak the language when interacting with friends and family. Tubaña said she has worked hard to bring her children up to speed with their peers.

"She works all day here and goes home at night to cook and clean and help the kids," Raun said. "Her kids finished in the top of their classes at the end of their first year."

Brenda Tubaña

members have settled into their new lives. Casiano Tubaña said he enjoys the ability to wear what he wants to school rather than the uniform he wore at his old school. Both children have discovered American food, and they request to have it at home.

"We have spaghetti at home but no meatballs," Elasia Tubaña said. "I really like the meatballs."

Tubaña said U.S. schools are much different for their children. Back in the Philippines, even kindergarten has semester tests. Although the homework was easy, there was plenty of it, and the teachers, rather than the students, changed classrooms.

Through God and the encouragement of friends and family, I was able to overcome the hardest moment of my life.

"Homework here is hard, but not much of it," Casiano Tubaña said.

For Tubaña, OSU courses have more applied subject matter and more interaction with students and professors. Most laboratory courses require more time to conduct work in the field and achieve hands-on research.

Tubaña said she will never forget the look on her children's faces when the first snow stuck to the ground. They had never seen snow before, and last year Oklahoma received enough for the children to build their first snowman.

"We all love it here and want to stay," Tubaña said. "Through God and the encouragement of friends and family, I was able to overcome the hardest moment of my life."

Tubaña said after she finishes her doctorate, she would like to continue research with Raun.

"I believe the technology developed here at OSU will deliver the goods to producers, and I really want to be a part of it," she said. "I want to help spread it out."

Tubaña also has worked diligently with other graduate students. She was awarded the Outstanding Ph.D. Student Award for 2005-06 in the OSU Department of Plant and Soil Sciences and the International Agroecosystem Graduate Scholarship Award for 2005-06. She is a member of the American Society of Agronomy, Crop Science Society of America and Soil Science Society of America.

Tubaña teaches a lab and said she enjoys teaching, but she admits she needs practice.

After graduation in May 2007, she is willing to take on any opportunity in her field, whether it is teaching, research or extension.

"Despite all the obstacles, she has excelled in many ways," Raun said. ☺



Brenda Tubaña, a plant and soil sciences graduate student from the Philippines, works in the wheat fields of South Australia. (Photo by Mark Branson)