

Pearly's Point

My 87-year-old mother and I, so far as I could tell, were the only non-Filipinos among the 50 or so onlookers at this year's Israel Filipino women's volleyball championship finals. An announcer voiced encouragement over the loud-speaker in Tagalog, the Filipino native language, as the players taped their fingers and took their places on a high school court in south Tel Aviv. We were there to cheer on Pearly's team, which was wearing bright yellow uniforms with the name of a gift shop embroidered on their backs.

The other team was from Haifa.

At least on the volleyball court the rules are fair and square and victory is within reach. But Pearly, 32, my parents' caregiver, is involved in another contest, where the rules were written by the other side and the result is far more fateful. The opponents are the Ministry of Interior, and Pearly's goal is to beat the rule that says the maximum amount of time foreign workers can stay in Israel is six years. And if we cheered her on the volleyball court, we are

Up Front



even much more eager to see her win this match.

Thousands of Filipinos, mainly young women, come to Israel to work as caregivers for the elderly and infirm. Technically speaking, their work consists of endless manual duties, but as I have observed from the way Pearly takes care of my parents, they provide much more than just assistance in washing and dressing.

Pearly, who has been here for more than six years, knows how to read every gesture made by my mother, whose speech has been impaired by a stroke. She knows how to smile at her and perk her up when she needs it. There is a wonderful warmth and chemistry between them. She also knows how to calm my father, late at night, when he becomes agitated by memories of the Holocaust. She does it all with gentleness and devotion, and, for her part, she has told me that she gets a great deal of job satisfaction.

Pearly's team falls behind in the first set, and I realize that the chances of a victorious outcome are now meager, both on and off the court. The ministry's rule, I have been advised by the staff at my parents' nursing home, is iron-clad. They have seen numerous applications for visa extensions like the one I am submitting for Pearly rejected out-of-hand.

Why, I wonder, as a young boy beats on a drum in the row in front of me, does the six-year rule exist at all? What risk is there to Israeli society if foreigners like Pearly spend more than six years in Israel? Indeed, what exactly is wrong with people like her being

able to get citizenship here?

My mind is wandering from the arena as Pearly's team loses the first set in the best-of-three series. Then, as I watch Pearly punch the ball into a high trajectory so that a taller teammate can spike it down on the other side of the net, I think of the Negro Baseball League that existed in the United States until the late 1940s. I'm wondering if, in her own way, Pearly can become the Jackie Robinson of Israeli volleyball and of the Filipinos' fight against the six-year rule, and do some rule-writing of her own. After trailing by ten points, Pearly's team has come from behind and the game is now tied at 24-24. The first to get 25 wins, but a set must be won by more than one point. Unfortunately the visitors take the next two points. Pearly and her team have lost.

The players hug and congratulate their opponents. There will be more games for the two teams. Though not necessarily for Pearly and some of the others who are past or approaching the six-year mark.

It's one thing to lose a volleyball game. It will be another thing, much sadder, if Pearly loses her job here and my parents lose the care they are getting from Pearly. But the real loser is a country which is excluding itself from the devotion and the skills and abilities of people like Pearly.

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