

Howard "H.Q." Quach, his wife Sarah, and their three children live in Riceville, in a truly pastoral setting that the young pastor from the suburbs of DC could have never imagined.

"We love the trees that surround the house. The mountains are breathtaking, especially the section of Riceville Road adjacent to one of Warren Wilson College's pastures," says Sarah.

Riceville Valley Community Church welcomed H.Q., their newest pastor in three years, with open arms. During the interview process he had asked whether the congregation might have any problem with an Asian pastor. The committee turned the question around. Would he have any problem being in the minority?

"We want you for who you are. And we want *you* to be *you*," was the committee's response. We think the congregation is going to love you -- as we already do."

"We had sent inquiries up and down the east coast," says Sarah. When Asheville responded, her heart leapt. She had roots in WNC, and many happy memories of growing up here.

Sarah is the second oldest of eight children. She spent summers at camps where her father was camp director. For seven years, her father taught at Christ School in Arden and the family had lived on campus. Her family, all ten of them, moved to Central Mexico as missionaries.

H.Q. and Sarah met in DC, at a hockey pre-game dinner for singles through their church. "Funny thing is, neither of us enjoy hockey," he says. "But that was the best \$40 we each ever spent."

Although Sarah has lived in different places, this is the first time H.Q. has lived outside suburban Maryland. "The first time I came to see the community, we kept driving and driving and I started thinking, this is really *far!*"

"Our neighbors are friendly and always willing to help if needed. Our closest neighbors have been wonderful. They've given us a tilled plot in their large vegetable garden," says H.Q. "They often bring back our empty trash and recycling bins down our very long driveway."

The grandparents visit often, bringing cousins to play with Rosie, 5, Maggie, 3, and their little brother Thomas, 1 ½. The family enjoys all the available kid-friendly local activities. "We attend public library events, Riceville Fire Department's Halloween party, the Black Mountain tailgate market, and Riceville Valley Community Church Carol Sing," says H.Q.

H.Q. chooses his words with care during our visit and suddenly erupts with a giggle when something strikes him as funny. Sarah has radiant, can-do energy, ready to open her arms for the girls and "Little Brother," still sleepy from a nap. Tommy surveys the scene with a studied expression, a sweet echo of his dad's.

Life as a new pastor has had some amusing, if not unnerving moments for H.Q. Eager to greet his new community, he changed the marquee message in front of the church. Since Covid lockdowns, the church had not had a permanent pastor. "The sign had not been changed for *ages*." He composed a message he felt hit just the right note, then placed each word with care and walked back to his office feeling satisfied.

Through the blinds, he noticed a couple of cars slowing down in front of the sign. One came to a full stop. *People are reading my sign!* Spontaneously, he popped out of the office, approaching the driver with his hand extended and excited to "play the new guy card" and introduce himself.

But as he approached, a fierce "HUFF" blasted from the direction of the marquee. He froze. An enormous mama bear and her cubs stood just feet away.

Oh! he thought. *They aren't looking at my sign!* "I started moonwalking back to my office as fast as I could." Once inside, he hastily locked the door and shut the blinds. For extra measure, he shoved a wedge under the door.

I could've been eaten, he thought, googling *BEAR ENCOUNTER*. But when *Kujo* didn't immediately crash through the wall, his alarm faded. He had a good laugh at his pride and imagined how the sign might read next: "Shortest Pastoral Tenure Ever."

Sometimes, adversity meets you head on. And when it came for H.Q., it was a beast of a different kind. As a teen, H.Q. had to undergo surgery for the first of what would be two kidney transplants.

"I had my first in 1995. My mom donated one of hers to me." Sixteen years later, the same year that H.Q. and Sarah married, "my brother flew in from out of state, and gave me one of his -- because transplanted kidneys don't last forever."

"I'm blessed to have as normal of a lifestyle as I do. I try to stay health-conscious, especially due to the immunosuppression medicine to prevent rejection. God has been so kind to sustain my health."

Exchanging the busy suburbs of DC for peaceful Riceville has been a big change. One aspect of city living that H.Q. did not anticipate missing was the mixed soundscape of countless different languages. He is, as one might expect of a pastor, an exquisitely keen listener. He enjoys hearing and distinguishing the varied and nuanced differences in the southern accents. "When we speak, we reveal so much more than just the words we say."

When the Quach family makes travel plans, visits with extended family is a high priority. "We love to travel, especially to places with bodies of water. Like the beach," says Sarah.

"Last year we met up with some extended family to attend the Cherokee Nation's yearly children's trout fishing derby. Rosie was our only child old enough to participate. We had a blast cheering her on. She pulled five beautiful trout out of the water all by herself. Maggie can't wait for it to be her turn this year."

Because they arrived just last Fall, H.Q. and Sarah are eager to also experience the warmer seasons at their sweet Riceville home. Sarah remembers playing in the forest as a kid and is happy their children will have similar memories. Bear encounters aside, they welcome life's adventures and the changing colors of Spring and Summer.

H.Q. and Sarah, what message would you like to give your neighbors?

We are grateful y'all have seamlessly received our family, transplants into the neighborhood. We pray we will flourish together. Our hearts are full for the valley of Riceville.