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L.I. Supporters Seek to Block Army Veteran's Deportation

By JULIA C. MEAD

HAUPPAUGE, N.Y., May 11 — Elected officials in Suffolk County have taken a hard line on the growing number of illegal, mostly Hispanic, immigrants who have settled here. But now some lawmakers have taken up the cause of one illegal immigrant, a Canadian who served in the United States Army but now faces deportation.

The immigrant, David DeJong, 30, is a single father of three, who came here as a teenager, graduated from a Long Island high school, enlisted in the Army in 1993 and was honorably discharged in 1998. Afterward, he spent nearly five years in civilian jobs on United States military bases in Germany and Hungary.

Mr. DeJong had the status of a permanent legal resident when he enlisted. But during his extended stay overseas, he failed to obtain the proper paperwork to re-enter the United States or to apply for United States citizenship, costing him his green card. His lawyer, Donald H. Birnbaum, is challenging the deportation order issued against Mr. DeJong.

Marc Raimondi, a spokesman for the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, said that the agency was aware of Mr. DeJong's case and was looking into it.

Representative Timothy Bishop, Assemblywoman Patricia Eddington and County Legislators Jack Eddington and Steven Stern are lobbying federal officials to reinstate Mr. DeJong's status as a legal resident and put him back on track for citizenship. His relatives on Long Island have collected more than 3,000 signatures on petitions.

"When I learned of this, I was dismayed, disgusted and outraged," Mr. Eddington — who is married to Assemblywoman Eddington — said of the deportation order at a news conference Thursday morning. "He is doing exactly what we have asked our immigrants to do: he has served our country, he pays his taxes and he obeys our laws."

Shawn Saucier, a spokesman for the federal Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services, which oversees applications for citizenship, said that green-card holders are not permitted to leave the country for more than a year without obtaining a re-entry permit or a returning-resident visa. Mr. DeJong has acknowledged his failure to do so.

Mr. DeJong, who is a student at Suffolk County Community College and hopes to become a teacher, now lives in Farmingville. The community is widely known for the Hispanic day laborers who congregate there while waiting for work.

Officials of the county and of Brookhaven Town, which includes Farmingville, have cracked down on employers who hire illegal immigrants and have raided houses where some of the workers live.

Mr. Eddington, a Vietnam veteran, said, "It's mind-boggling that hundreds of illegal immigrants are allowed to congregate out in public like that while the feds are trying to deport a U.S. veteran."

Mr. DeJong's ex-wife is German and his sons — Markus, who is 6, and Lukas and Sean, who are 5-year-old twins — were born in Germany and are eligible for dual German and Canadian citizenship.

Mr. DeJong said he went to Canada in October to obtain documents to secure Canadian citizenship for his sons. But he was stopped at the border when he tried to re-enter the United States.

He said immigration officials told him his green card had been invalidated and demanded that he sign a document waiving his claim to permanent residency before they would allow him to re-enter the United States. "My sons were my first priority so I signed," he said. "I just wanted to get home."

Later, Representative Bishop, Democrat of Southampton, helped Mr. DeJong win temporary residency so he could fight deportation. His next hearing before an immigration judge is in September.

Asked why he did not apply for United States citizenship, Mr. DeJong said he should have. "I thought I was being as American as I could be, serving in the military," he said.

He remained in Germany after his discharge, he said, to take advantage of its socialized health care, because he had no insurance to pay for multiple operations to correct his son Markus's heart problem. Mr. DeJong said he has raised his sons "to be proud of where they came from but to take pride in where they are now, as do I."