

Senator's Wife Can Stay in U.S.

WXIA

Reported By Jon Shirek

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ATLANTA (WXIA) -- The Colombia-born wife of a Georgia state senator surrendered to authorities in Atlanta Tuesday morning after finding out she will not be deported to her native country after all. Speaking in Spanish, Sascha Herrera, who is married to Sen. Curt Thompson of Norcross, denied reports that she went into hiding after immigration officials appeared at her home with a deportation order.

"That hurts me a lot," she said. "Reading on the Internet, they said I was hiding out, so as not to go to jail. But at no time was I trying to hide out. I was just trying to buy some time to see what was happening and the best way to deal with it."

Herrera said she surrendered Tuesday morning prepared to go to jail, realizing she could end up there for weeks while her lawyer straightened out her residency status. It was a tough decision, she said, "because I didn't do anything to deserve jail."

Herrera turned herself in about 8 a.m. at the immigration office across the street from the federal courthouse in downtown Atlanta. She then met with an immigration judge and attorneys for the Immigration and Customs Enforcement field office and got the deportation order against her lifted.

Herrera's husband, as well as her attorney, were with her when she appeared before the judge to seek permanent residency in the U.S.

Herrera blamed the confusion on a notario who she said defrauded her after claiming he could help her gain permanent residency. The deportation order stemmed from Herrera's repeated failure to appear before a judge on an asylum application, which she said she did not know had been filed. She had been out of sight since Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers arrived at her home Nov. 28 with an order to remove her from the U.S. She was not home at the time.

After the deportation order was lifted, Herrera spoke to reporters. "I'm very happy, and thank you all. And please don't, I mean, from immigrants like me, please don't let people like notarios take advantage of you," she said.

"The lesson is, you shouldn't trust people who don't know what they're doing. And unfortunately, innocent victims like Sascha, who don't understand the complexities of U.S. Immigration law, frequently get taken advantage of by people, many times from their own community, who are simply out to make money for themselves and not help others," said attorney Charles Kuck.

Herrera's husband, a Democrat and immigration advocate, said what his wife experienced is a nationwide problem. A hearing on her status as a U.S. citizen is expected in the next two to four

months.

According to the couple's attorney, Herrera came to the U.S. -- where her parents have been living -- on a visitor visa in 2003. She applied for an extension to the visa through the "notario" - a man who claimed he was qualified to handle legal immigration matters -- but did not get it until 20 days before the extension was due to expire.

The notario then suggested an asylum application, which Herrera signed, but she got a "bad vibe" from the man and decided not to proceed, Kuck said.

Later in 2004, she was accepted as a student at Kennesaw State University, which got a student visa for her. She told the notario she did not want anything to do with him.

She met Thompson last year and they got married in April, when he applied for her to become a permanent resident. But in the meantime, the notario filed the asylum application, listing his address as hers.

Herrera said she can't stop all the notarios who prey upon immigrants seeking legal residency status, but she said she can try to stop the one she hired.

"We're going to take all the steps necessary so that person will not do any harm to anybody else," Herrera said.

Herrera's attorney said he has reported the notario, whom he did not name, to the State Bar of Georgia, and is seeking a meeting with Gwinnett County District Attorney Danny Porter, hoping they will investigate the man and put him out of business.

Herrera's husband said it might take a change in federal law to attack the practice, nationwide. Sen. Thompson said it is his understanding that, in his wife's case, the notario committed no more than a misdemeanor, even though the bureaucratic mess he says the man caused nearly got his wife deported.

(The Associated Press contributed to this report).