

Slow system leaves Tenn. couple in immigration limbo

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Efforts to gain legal status separates couple for a year.

NASHVILLE -- The smiling faces of Heren and Ricardo Morales flashed on the screen just before the start of a recent Sunday morning service at [MJLife Church](#) in Mount Juliet, Tenn.

Below the photo, taken on their wedding day, was a simple, three-word prayer: "Bring Ricardo Home."

In March 2012, Ricardo Morales, who's 24, traveled to his home country of Mexico in the first step toward becoming a legal resident in the United States. He left behind his 26-year-old wife Heren, his stepson Ozman, 8, and daughter Miranda, 3.

A year and more than \$7,000 in legal fees later, Ricardo is stuck in immigration limbo. His case may not be resolved for another year or more. As his wife and church family pray and write letters in his support, their pastor says Ricardo's story has changed his own views on immigration reform. Church members say Ricardo's plight shows just how broken the system is.

"They have done everything they are supposed to do," said Richelle Tramel, a church friend. "They have paid every dime they are supposed to pay. He is still not home."

Heren and Ricardo met about three years ago after Heren, who was single, moved to Mount Juliet to care for her ailing father. A flier advertising a sermon series about marriage caught her eye.

"I wanted to get married sometime in the future, so I went," she said. Before long she became a regular attendee at MJLife Church.

Around the same time she joined the church, Heren met Ricardo on a double date with a friend.

The Rev. Eddie Poole, Heren's pastor, felt protective when Heren mentioned that she'd met a guy. He wanted to know that Ricardo would treat her well.

Before long, Ricardo became part of the church family. Every Sunday he'd volunteer to set up and take down chairs and other equipment. Poole said that whatever needed to be done, Ricardo was willing to help.

Poole officiated at Heren and Ricardo's wedding in March 2011, and church members baked the cake and took photos.

Still, Heren said that one worry remained: Ricardo was in the country illegally. He told her about his legal status when they met, but "it's the kind of thing you overlook when you fall in love," she said.

The couple was particularly worried about the now-shuttered 287(g) program in Davidson County, Tenn. At the time, immigrants with no legal status could be deported after minor offenses such as fishing without a license.

"If you got caught, they just took you away and you'd have to leave your family behind," she said.

Heren and Ricardo decided to try to get him legal status.

It's not easy, said Linda Rose, a Nashville, Tenn.-based immigration attorney. Ricardo first had to get a form from the immigration office in Nashville stating that he was leaving the country voluntarily. That office told him he had to leave before March 18, 2012, which was just shy of the couple's first anniversary.

Once he left the country, Ricardo could apply for a visa to rejoin Heren, who is a U.S. citizen. That's when things got complicated. Admitting to crossing the border illegally means an automatic 10-year ban. The only way around the ban is a hardship waiver, which Ricardo applied for last year. There's no guarantee that the waiver will be granted.

"The irony is that the way the law is drafted, people who leave the country to do things the right way are punished," said Rose, managing partner of Rose Immigration LLC. "I don't advocate breaking the law, but it's easier to stay in the country without documents."

Before he met Ricardo, Poole said he assumed there was a straightforward way for people to get legal immigrant status. So he had little patience for those in the country illegally. He thought they should either get legal status or leave.

Watching Heren and Ricardo's struggle has changed his mind. Not long ago he wrote a blog post on the topic called "When Our Government Lacks a Brain: Bring Ricardo Home!"

"This has definitely put a face on this issue for me," he said. "We need to give guys like Ricardo a break, especially when they are trying to work within the system."

At first Heren hoped Ricardo would be home by Christmas. On Dec. 27, she got a letter from the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services office in El Paso, Texas, saying it needed up to another year to review his waiver application.

To get a waiver, Heren must prove that Ricardo's absence has caused extreme hardship. She's had to work two jobs since he left, along with caring for Ozman and her ailing dad. It's putting a huge strain on the family, she said.

Daily phone calls with Ricardo keep her going. He's in Piedras Negras, a border town just south of Eagle River, Texas. "When I am feeling down, he is the one who says, 'Don't give up — keep going to church, keep the faith,' " she said.

Robert Parham, executive director of the Nashville-based [Baptist Center for Ethics](#), said that church members, who believe in obeying the law, sometimes see people who are in the country without legal status as bad people. Ricardo's story shows that's not the case, he said.

"This story is yet another reminder of how broken the American immigration system is," he said. "Here is a married family, involved in the church, who wants to do the right thing, and the system is not working for them."

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