

One family's struggle with immigration

When a Catonsville mother of four recently took her oath as a naturalized citizen of the United States, the event proved to be bittersweet.

Though the 28-year-old native of Mexico was proud to have finally become a citizen of her beloved adopted country, her husband remains an undocumented alien and legal consultants have not been encouraging about changing his status.

Since this St. Gabriel, Woodlawn, parishioner's husband entered the United States illegally more than a decade ago, it may be impossible for him to gain legal status in this country, unless a proposed immigration reform bill is approved by Congress, said Patricia Chiriboga-Roby, an attorney for Catholic Charities' Immigration Legal Services.

For the purposes of this article, the new citizen will be identified only by her first name, Erica.

Erica's journey to citizenship has been long, hard fought and expensive, but she says the struggle has been worthwhile, and she foresees a bright future for her and her children - three of whom were born in the U.S.

Born in Guanajuato, a town near Mexico City, Erica grew up hearing about the opportunities offered in the country across the border and dreamed of a new life in the U.S.

In the 1980s, her father took advantage of an amnesty program under President Ronald Regan's administration and established roots in the Baltimore area.

He was soon followed by Erica's mother and two sisters, while she stayed in Mexico to marry her childhood sweetheart.

However, after years of struggling in a country with few economic opportunities, the couple decided they should join Erica's family with their young daughter and make a

better life for themselves.

After her father became a U.S. citizen in the 1990s, he made an application to sponsor Erica to obtain a visa allowing her to legally join him in Maryland, but the process would take years to come to fruition.

Her impatient husband decided - in the meantime - to illegally cross the Rio Grande and began working in Texas, sending money home to Erica and their daughter and making the occasional risky trip back to their Mexican town for brief visits.

“He never had trouble finding and keeping a job in this country,” she said. “He’s a good worker, and his bosses just paid him under the table.”

Even as an illegal alien, Erica’s husband was able to earn a considerably larger paycheck than in his home country and at the time, the risk of deportation or jail seemed necessary, she said.

In 1998, Erica was granted a visa to enter the U.S.

Pregnant with her second child, she left her young daughter in the care of relatives in Mexico, traveled to a border town to endure days of paperwork at immigration and finally arrived at her parents’ Baltimore-area home. She was joined by her husband a short time later.

Erica immediately began the process of applying for the coveted “green card” at Catholic Charities’ Hispanic Apostolate in Fells Point, gave birth to her second daughter and waited an agonizing two years before her oldest child was able to enter the U.S. legally.

Over the years, she gave birth to two sons and became fluent in English, and her husband earned a living under the table assisting a Baltimore-area plumber and a general contractor, bought a house and two cars, and eventually opened a construction company, placing the business license in her name.

During this time, Erica has worked tirelessly with attorneys at the Hispanic Apostolate to become a naturalized citizen and gain legal status for her husband, which would take away the threat of deportation and separating the family.

Hispanic Apostolate staff members were overjoyed when Erica gained her citizenship this spring because the positive outcomes are usually outweighed by the heartbreaking cases, said Cynthia Fickes, director of the Catholic Charities organization.

With about 150 immigration proceedings stored in her office filing cabinet, Ms. Chiriboga-Roby juggles about a dozen court cases at any given time and has seen families ripped apart when one or more members were deported and the others were allowed to stay.

With Hispanic immigrants making up an estimated 11 percent of the nation's population, it's likely that 20 million foreigners are living in the U.S. without documentation.

"I've had people come in here, and I've looked at their circumstances and just been up front with them that there was nothing I could do to fix their situation," she said. "They come here for a better life and fill a real need in our labor shortage, but it's not an easy process to enter the country to work legally, and many end up having to live in the shadows."

It costs immigrants an average of \$800 to obtain a green card allowing them to legally work and reside in this country, and people trying to legitimize their presence here pay legal and processing fees as much as \$7,000 if they are using subsidized legal consultation, like at the Hispanic Apostolate, Ms. Chiriboga-Roby said.

Private immigration attorneys charge considerably more, with \$50,000 being the greatest amount she has ever heard of.

"There are also people out there who take advantage of Hispanic immigrants, promising them a solution to their immigration problems, taking their money when they know their case is impossible, and then don't deliver for them," Ms. Fickes said. "They are preying on the fears of the vulnerable. It's despicable."

Immigrants have to be sponsored by family members or employers to legally enter the country, and there are a host of reasons for them to be rejected, including

having a criminal record, a communicable disease or a physical or mental disorder, Ms. Chiriboga-Roby said.

If they come into the country illegally, it becomes very difficult to help them gain legal status and in many cases it's impossible, she said.

Right now, Ms. Chiriboga-Roby is working with Erica on a possible solution for her husband, if one can actually be achieved.

"We work very hard and have made a nice life here in America," Erica said. "All four of my children are very smart. They do well in school, and I want them all to go to college because that is how you make a good future and become a good citizen. I hope we can all be citizens one day."