



Woman facing deportation remains at Simi church

By Jacky Guerrero , Tom Kisken
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Two years ago today, an illegal immigrant threatened with deportation found sanctuary at a tiny church in Simi Valley. The news is there is no news.

A deadlock that once involved television cameras, city officials who wrote to the Department of Homeland Security, and protesters with bullhorns continues, although few people pay attention.

A 31-year-old woman from Oxnard named Liliana, accused of falsely claiming to be a U.S. citizen during a failed attempt to enter the country a decade ago, remains on church property 730 days after she arrived with her then-5-month-old son. She stayed there when her uncle died and when her father was in the hospital with prostate cancer, fearful leaving even for a few hours could mean deportation.

As they have from the beginning, immigration authorities say only that they have the right to arrest lawbreakers at what they call appropriate times and places. They have made no visible effort to contact Liliana.

Her children have written letters to President Barack Obama. Her lawyers hold out hope they have found a way to allow her to return home to Oxnard, maybe within months. But legal experts say there's no way to know how long the stalemate will continue.

"They could ignore her for the rest of her life," said USC law professor Niels Frenzen, who expects the government will eventually act.

She calls herself Liliana Santuario, using the Spanish word for sanctuary and refusing to use her real name. She lives behind United Church of Christ in a parsonage decorated with her wedding photo, a flag that displays Our Lady of Guadalupe amid Mexico's colors and knickknacks featuring Hannah Montana.

Inside the front door, on the other side of a welcome sign, hangs a note with the phone number of a lawyer to call in case a visitor refuses to provide identification. That has happened.

But the threats of citizen arrests, angry rallies on Sunday mornings and a battle with the city over the costs of security at the protests faded long ago. Ask people once involved about Liliana now and they're surprised she's still there.

"I've basically lost track. I guess at this point we don't care," said Simi Valley Mayor Paul Miller, who once traveled to Washington, D.C., to ask federal officials to expedite Liliana's case and minimize the security risk posed to the city. "We can't get the feds to do anything. As far as I'm concerned, it's a nonissue."

Protesters said the same thing. “Is that chick still there?” asked a former leader of the Save Our State group who asked that his name not be used. He once organized the rallies demanding Liliana’s deportation.

No visible options

She lives in the sanctuary with her three children, ages 2, 6 and 9, all born in the United States. They come and go for soccer games and miniature golf outings. Her husband, Gerardo, is a naturalized citizen who works for a tool company, lives in Oxnard but spends much time at the parsonage.

Liliana has left the church property two or three times for short periods of time, accompanied by a member of the sanctuary team and worried about what might happen, said Alice Linsmeier of the Ventura County Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice, the group organizing sanctuary efforts.

Linsmeier wouldn’t give details but said the outings were prompted by what she called “urgent needs” in which there didn’t seem to be any alternative.

Sitting on a couch with her husband, Liliana cries when she talks about what she can’t do: go to her kids’ sports games, travel, or visit her father when he was being treated at St. John’s Regional Medical Center in Oxnard.

“He said, ‘Liliana, you stay in the house, I’m fine. ... Your brothers and sisters stay with me in the hospital,’ ” she said.

She started studying English in Simi Valley and sometimes speaks in circles that may be due to language or to the strange dynamics that dictate her life. Ask her if she feels trapped and she says no.

“I feel I don’t have any options,” she said.

When she first came to Simi, it was supposed to be for three months. Other area congregations have considered providing shelter but have opted instead for a support role, contributing food, money and other aid. Every three months, the 80 members of United Church of Christ vote on whether to continue as host church. The votes have been unanimous.

Several congregants say their support of Liliana hasn’t waned. They see the family as part of their congregation.

“Most of us feel like this is such a commitment to justice and equality and that’s a humane kind of cause,” said church member Dot Blankley. “We all believe in families being together and being able to support each other. I think that’s what makes it seem like not a burden.”

‘Nation of laws’

Liliana’s legal jeopardy dates back to 1998 when she tried to follow family members who had already settled in the United States. After being turned down for a student visa, she was caught trying to cross the border and, according to a lawyer, accused of claiming to be a U.S. citizen. She later crossed the border in a different place and started her life in Oxnard, working in a factory, getting married and, after living in a garage for five years, buying a home.

She was in her pajamas when armed immigration agents came to her door at 6:15 a.m. to deport her on May 16, 2007. Her infant son started crying. Her 4-year-old daughter pleaded with the officers not to take her mother away.

The agents gave her a short reprieve. Liliana contacted her lawyer and then leaders of what is called the New Sanctuary Movement, built on the premise that immigration authorities won't arrest people in religious settings. She ended up in the home of a Catholic deacon, then an Episcopal church in Long Beach and finally in Simi Valley.

Although her story no longer attracts the attention it once did, the particulars still generate impassioned debates.

"We're a nation of laws. If you came here illegally, you should be deported," said Neal Abramson, a transportation supervisor from Ventura. "Look, I feel sorry for her and her situation and her family ... but you have to follow the rules of wherever you live."

Supporters question the merits of a system that deports people who own homes, have children and spouses here, work hard and have never had legal problems aside from their immigration status.

"Our case is an example of the thousands of people who are in the same situation," said Gerardo, Liliana's husband, who also won't give his last name. "The laws were broken way before we came."

Trying to prove hardship

Officials at Immigration and Customs Enforcement have never commented on Liliana's case or on policies for dealing with illegal immigrants in sanctuary. Peter Schey, a lawyer from the Center on Human Rights and Constitutional Law, said the government also has not responded to legal efforts.

Lawyers have been working on Liliana's case for more than two years. Schey said that within weeks they will file a petition with the government asking for humanitarian relief that would allow Liliana to remain here without fear of deportation.

To win, the lawyers will have to prove Liliana's deportation would be an extreme hardship. It would mean returning to a country where her family no longer lives and that she doesn't consider home. She worries about violence in Mexico, about a story her mother told her of a 13-year-old boy there who beat another boy to death with a stick and then castrated him.

If she were deported, her husband would likely stay in Oxnard to support the family, but her children might go with her. That scares her more.

"I fight for the right to stay for my kids," she said.

Schey said he is optimistic. But Frenzen, the law professor from USC, said the chances of winning relief could be hurt by the reality that there are thousands of families with stories almost identical to Liliana's.

"The DHS (Department of Homeland Security) looks at these requests through a very rigorous lens and they are approved few and far between," he said.

If the legal bid fails, Schey said lawyers will probably turn to Congress and try to gain support for special legislation, written specifically for Liliana and designed to work like a pardon.

The other avenue of hope is immigration reform that changes current laws and provides a path to legal status for people like Liliana.

Obama said last week that such legislation would have to wait until next year because of the ongoing battle for healthcare reform and the pressing need to address energy policy. But the president also appeared at a meeting Thursday with immigration reform backers, which some advocates see as a show of support.

Liliana has no more insight on her future than anyone else. She dreams of returning to Oxnard but lives knowing her life is a recording on pause. The only certainty is the risk she takes if she leaves.

“My faith is big, sometimes is little,” she said of her hopes, “but I stay here.”



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