

LEGAL STATUS OUT OF REACH FOR MANY

By RIVA BROWN, Clarion Ledger
September 28, 2003

About six years ago, Angelica Mazy of Clinton met and married her husband Abraham Mazy in Mexico, but he lived in the United States.

Weary of being away from her new husband, she left Mexico before he could apply for her to come legally. She would not say how she got to Mississippi.

When her husband applied for her to become a legal permanent resident of the United States, Angelica Mazy had to return to Mexico. She could not simply adjust her status here because she had entered the country illegally.

By leaving the United States, Angelica Mazy was subject to a 10-year bar from returning because she had been in the country illegally for more than a year.

But because her husband was a citizen, Angelica Mazy was eligible for a waiver. She still, however, had to wait eight months in Mexico before the waiver could be processed.

Her time away from her husband was difficult, Angelica Mazy said.

"My son, he used to ask, 'Mama, when Daddy is going to come? When we're going back to Mississippi? I want to go home. I miss my home,' " she said.

Now Angelica Mazy looks forward to the day she can become a citizen. She has about a year left to wait.

"I don't feel safe even if I have my permanent residency. I don't know why I am scared," Mazy said. "I don't want to feel unsafe because I have my two kids who are U.S. citizens and my husband. I don't want something to happen to me like ... a law changes or whatever and I have to go back to my country."

Jose Rodriguez and 28 other immigrants set sail in a small boat from the Dominican Republic en route to Puerto Rico. Then a dirt truck driver, Rodriguez thought he could make more money if he went to the United States. Puerto Rico was the easiest way to get there.

But when he arrived in 1985, Rodriguez couldn't find a job driving trucks. So he worked in the hot sun on coffee fields.

"It was really hard work," he said through a translator. "But once you get into something

like that, you've got to stick to it, you've got to survive."

Rodriguez eventually got a job working in construction before he finally became a garbage truck driver, earning more than he did in the Dominican Republic. He sent money home when he could and visited his family about once every two years.

Rodriguez arrived in Miami in 1992, four years after the federal government granted amnesty to immigrants. Amnesty allowed them to become legal permanent residents.

Rodriguez didn't know enough English to become a truck driver in Miami, so he wound up working construction until 1995, when he arrived in Mississippi to work for a chicken plant.

His wife and four youngest children joined him - a decade after they originally separated. He applied in 1991 to bring them here.

Rodriguez of Forest wants to bring the rest of his 11 children to this country, but he must prove he can support them at an income of 125 percent above the mandated poverty line - or at least \$54,400 for a family of 13, read or write enough English to take the test to become a citizen. Legal permanent residents must wait 15 years and be over age 55 to take the test in their own language.

Rodriguez is looking forward to becoming a citizen.

"I'll be able to vote and elect a president because my vote will count," Rodriguez said. "I think I'll receive better consideration because I'll be a citizen. Now I'm a resident, but I don't have the same guarantees as if I was a citizen."

For two years in Argentina, Walter Nadalin owned the New Capital, a restaurant and bar with a picture of Humphrey Bogart on the wall and five employees who served three square meals a day.

When the economy collapsed, leading children to beg his workers and customers for money, Nadalin sold New Capital for \$10,000, half of what he paid for it, so he could get a visa waiver to come to America.

The visa gave him permission to enter the country as a tourist. But Walter never planned to visit; he planned to stay.

Three days after arriving in Hollywood, Fla., Nadalin found a job as a busboy. He worked that job until he read a newspaper ad for jobs at B.C. Rogers chicken processing plant in Forest.

Although he was an undocumented immigrant, the plant gave him a job because he could

show he entered the country legally.

The day before his two-year-mark at the chicken plant, Nadalin said he was fired because he could not present papers showing he was legally able to work in the country.

That was seven or eight months ago. Married for about a year, Nadalin once again is working as a busboy at a restaurant in Forest and trying to become a permanent resident.

Had he not married an American citizen, Nadalin probably would never be able to apply for legal permanent residency.

"Suppose I go to a casino now and I get \$1 million. I'm going to stay here. I don't want to go back," said Nadalin, who studied business, law and computer science in college. "I hope someday to get the residency and the citizenship, anything, because this country helps me so much, and I want to pay it back."