

RED TAPE SEPARATES MATRIARCH, FAMILY

Lockhart woman is stuck in Ireland, awaiting approval of a delayed green card

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The parched plains of Lockhart bear little resemblance to the lush verdure of Shannon, Ireland.

Bridget Reuter has no doubt about where she'd rather be.

"I consider my home Lockhart," she said by phone from Shannon. "I want to be with my husband and my son and my grandchildren."

For nearly nine months, the 61-year-old Ireland native has been living in her mother's house in Shannon, thousands of miles away from her family. The reason, said son Richard Reuter, is that the U.S. Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services won't let her come home.

The family's story began in November, when Bridget Reuter, who moved to Lockhart in 1999, went back to Shannon for a wedding. More than a year before, her New York-born husband, Dietrich Reuter, petitioned for permanent resident status on her behalf. The application was approved in January 2001, which meant that a green card would be granted. But in processing the petition, a typographical error in her identification number -- a 6 was changed to a 5 -- threw its status into limbo. The family was unaware of the problem and was still waiting on the green card when she left the country. A major oversight on Reuter's part compounded her plight.

The problem became evident when Reuter was stopped by immigration officials at Shannon Airport, taken to an interrogation room for six hours and then denied re-entry to the United States.

"She was crying and told us she was humiliated and upset," said Richard Reuter, 31.

Immigration officials' reason for detaining Bridget Reuter was that she hadn't applied for "advance parole" -- permission to leave the United States while her green card was pending.

"We were told it would take several months to get her green card," said Richard Reuter. "We never got anything else from the INS saying there was anything else to be done."

The immigration bureau states on its Web site that "Most aliens who have pending applications for immigration benefits . . . need Advance Parole to re-enter the U.S. after traveling abroad. Aliens . . . must be approved for advance parole prior to leaving the

United States in order to avoid the termination of their pending application for adjustment."

Immigration officials could not be reached for comment Monday.

The family's lawyer, New York-based immigration specialist Jim O'Malley, is helping Bridget Reuter get her green card from abroad, a process he said could take years. He said problems with the bureau are systemic.

"Most people don't know (about advance parole), and a lot of the time the (bureau) won't even tell people this is available," he said. "This stuff is so bureaucratic and convoluted. It's quite irrational, really."

In January, Richard Reuter made a humanitarian plea to the Immigration and Naturalization Service. The letter explained the family's circumstances: Richard is divorced and has custody of his two children, and Dietrich was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in March 2002. The family lives in a three-bedroom house in Lockhart.

"My parents are more than just a mother and father; they are my landlords, my baby sitters, my support in readapting to life as a single parent," Richard Reuter wrote.

Officials responded by mail: "Although the facts as presented are certainly unfortunate, it has been determined after careful review that a favorable exercise of this Attorney General's discretionary authority is not warranted."

"The reason that parole was denied is that it's only used in the absolute desperate situations," O'Malley said. "The person must have no other possible avenue to get into the U.S. And she does. Mrs. Reuter can get back into the U.S. with a green card. It's just going to take some time."

Under immigration law, the attorney general can exercise discretionary authority if "refusal of admission . . . would result in extreme hardship to the citizen spouse or parent of such alien."

"She has proved herself as the loyal spouse of someone who served loyally," said Richard Reuter. "They could've exercised discretionary authority."

Missing her

For Dietrich Reuter, 69, the story began more than 33 years ago when he met Bridget in Weymouth, England. She was a nurse, and he was working for the U.S. Air Force.

"She was there, having a beer, and I met her," he said. "I guess we, for some reason, liked each other." They married in 1970 in Weymouth.

His work for the Air Force and the Defense Department took them all over Europe. In late 1999, they moved to Lockhart from Germany. What stands out in his memory is their devotion to each other, he said.

"Without my wife, there's no living," Dietrich Reuter said. "She is my life, and I am her life."

Bridget Reuter said she tries to keep busy while she waits. The weekly phone calls from Texas lift her spirits.

"I'm here with my 85-year-old mother," she said. "I . . . keep myself busy and work a little in the garden."

In Lockhart, Dietrich spends his days tending the yard and waiting for his wife's return. The well-kept home is decorated with relics of their life -- painted Russian boxes, Austrian crystal, British figurines and landscape paintings.

Dietrich prefers to dote over the lawn, his son said. "He spends all his time out there so he doesn't have to be surrounded by memories of mom."

Richard and his children, Richard Jr., 4, and Taiz, 8, share a bedroom. The children speak fondly of their grandmother.

"We don't know what's going on," said Taiz. "We just want her back."

Key dates in Bridget Reuter's tangle with the INS

- November 1999: Dublin-born Bridget Reuter and her husband Dietrich Reuter move to Lockhart from Germany. Dietrich Reuter begins immigration paperwork for his wife.
- January 18, 2001: Bridget Reuter's green card application is approved, pending months of paperwork.
- Nov. 18, 2002: Bridget travels to Ireland for her niece's wedding.
- Nov. 26: Bridget is detained at Shannon Airport by the INS, interrogated and told she can't leave the country.
- January 2003: Richard writes plea letter to INS.
- February: Plea denied by INS; family contacts offices of senators Ron Paul and Kay Bailey Hutchison.
- March: INS, in a letter to Ron Paul, denies humanitarian parole to Bridget Reuter.

Source: Richard and Bridget Reuter, INS/BCIS documents