

## **IMMIGRANT SAYS LEGAL STATUS WAS BAIT FOR FRAUD**

By JOHN McDONALD, The Orange County Register, April 3, 2002

Officials believe 21 victims lost thousands to the scheme in Orange County.

Her quest for legal status began when she was asked to be a bridesmaid.

The Anaheim woman said she accepted readily, only to later find out the wedding was to be in San Diego.

"I couldn't go," she said.

The woman, who has lived in Orange County for 15 years, said she was afraid to ride through the checkpoint set up by the Border Patrol on the San Diego (I-5) Freeway south of San Clemente.

She is one of 21 immigrants who say they lost a total of \$57,000 to a mother-daughter team targeting those seeking legal status in the United States.

The woman, who asked that she not be identified because she fears retribution, said she had come from Mexico with a passport numerous times to visit her sister, who is here legally.

On one trip, she decided to stay. She has worked ever since in Orange County, for the last four years as an assistant manager in a small business in Orange. She is also raising a family and has an infant daughter.

She looked for an immigration lawyer, and a friend recommended Norma Lillian Perez, 31, of Fontana. Perez professed to be an Immigration and Naturalization Service employee and able, for a price, to help those seeking legal status. She said they had several meetings, and she was always being asked for more money.

"I had to pay for all that stuff. I needed pictures. I needed forms," the woman said.

She said eight members of her family are among the victims, and lost a total of \$18,000.

Nativo Lopez, executive director of the Santa Ana office of Hermandad Mexicana Nacional, said he is dumbfounded by the ease with which some immigrants are scammed.

"I see people who I have personally told to go to our immigration counselors fall victim," he lamented.

The cost of obtaining legal status is a few hundred dollars, he said, but it can take up to 10 years, depending on the specifics of the case.

Lopez said Orange County District Attorney Anthony Rackauckas said at a candidate debate held at Hermandad in February that he was willing to prosecute crimes against immigrants if witnesses were willing to come forward.

The pair was arrested Friday after investigators outfitted a mobile home in Stanton with recording devices. The suspects were invited to the home to collect money from one of the victims. The women are charged with 15 counts of fraud, larceny and conspiracy. They face up to seven years in prison if convicted. They are in jail awaiting a hearing.

Thom Mrozek, a spokesman for the U.S. Attorney for Central California, said he could not recall the last time a person was prosecuted for impersonating an INS official. He said that generally, crime victims in the country illegally have been given legal status to remain, but such decisions are made on a case-by-case basis.

One of the more brazen schemes targeting immigrants was broken by federal agents last week in Los Angeles. Four people were charged with staging a phony citizenship ceremony, which included the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance and an oath administered by a man dressed in a judge's robe.