

SHAM MARRIAGE SCHEME UNCOVERED

By JAY WEAVER, Miami Herald
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A U.S. immigration agent and a paralegal matchmaker conspired to arrange potentially hundreds of sham marriages in Miami-Dade County so that the illegal spouses could obtain resident alien cards - charging them from \$5,000 to \$10,000 each, federal prosecutors say.

Jose Luis Cintron, 47, a Miami Immigration and Naturalization Service official, rubber-stamped residency applications in which typically a non-Cuban Hispanic would marry a Cuban national solely for the purpose of gaining legal status, according to an arrest complaint.

Cintron, who made about \$55,000 a year, did not conduct the normally required rigorous interviews.

Unlike other foreigners, Cubans automatically enjoy legal residency within a year of arriving in this country. Anyone who marries a Cuban would eventually share that same status, making Cintron's alleged criminal enterprise with paralegal Guillermo Rico quite lucrative, federal agents say.

INS agents recovered \$100,000 in cash from Cintron's North Miami home when they arrested him late Friday night; they also seized another \$100,000 in cash and checks - plus a Rolex watch valued at \$20,000 - from Rico's home in North Miami Beach. That home doubled as an office for his business, Justice Paralegal Service.

"Usually, when people go in for sham marriages, they will be coached [for questioning] to get them approved," John Woods, INS section chief in Miami, said Monday after a court hearing. In this case, [Cintron] approved them automatically.

Woods said Cintron, who was released on a \$150,000 bond Monday, has been involved in at least 500 cases since he began reviewing residency applications in 1999. Before that, he had been an INS inspector at Miami International Airport since 1991.

Woods said INS agents, who are working on the case with the Department of Justice and Miami-Dade Police Department, said Cintron might have tainted other residency applications beyond those under his direct control.

"We're looking at everything he touched," Woods said.

Rico, 50, will have his bond hearing Thursday. Both defendants, who still must be assigned lawyers, are scheduled to be arraigned March 10, when they will enter their pleas.

Last summer, investigators penetrated the alleged conspiracy by using a confidential Miami-Dade police informant who approached Rico about setting up a sham marriage and obtaining legal residency papers from Cintron.

Rico laid the groundwork by falsifying such paperwork as utility bills, lease agreements and other shared housing arrangements.

Thursday evening, the informant met with his sham spouse and Cintron at Rico's house. According to the court complaint, Cintron completed residency papers for the informant and his spouse. The informant paid \$3,000 to Cintron, \$3,000 to the spouse and another \$4,000 to Rico, the complaint said.

That same evening, Cintron also took care of paperwork for two other cooperating sources and their spouses, the complaint said.

The INS agent also placed official stamps on their passports, showing they were legal residents.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Marvelle McIntyre-Hall said federal agents planned to pore over every residency application approved by Cintron to try to figure out which marriages were bogus and which were legitimate.