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U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement

News Releases

September 23, 2009

72-year-old Fort Worth woman sentenced to nearly 4 years in federal prison for her role as leader of visa fraud scheme ***She arranged fraudulent marriages between foreign nationals and U.S. citizens for a fee***

DALLAS - A 72-year-old grandmother who operated a marriage fraud ring for decades was sentenced Sept. 23 to serve 44 months in federal prison. The sentence was announced by Acting U.S. Attorney James T. Jacks of the Northern District of Texas. The case was investigated by the following agencies: U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), the Social Security Administration's Office of Inspector General, the Health and Human Services Commission's Office of Inspector General, and the Department of Homeland Security's Office of Inspector General.

Maria Refugia Camarillo was sentenced by U.S. District Judge Jorge A. Solis following her July 1 guilty plea for conspiring to commit fraud in connection with immigration documents. Judge Solis also ordered Camarillo to serve two years of supervised release. Four of the 16 defendants have yet to be sentenced.

According to documents filed in court, Camarillo, and a number of individuals in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, ran the fraudulent scheme beginning in the 1980s and continuing until May 2008. Foreign nationals, who wanted to become U.S. permanent residents, paid Camarillo to arrange a marriage between them and a U.S. citizen. Once married, they applied for U.S. permanent residence and later, U.S. citizenship.

"For decades, this woman ignored immigration laws and even recruited numerous family members to join this conspiracy," said John Chakwin Jr., special agent in charge of the ICE Office of Investigations. "Our ICE-led Document and Benefit Fraud Task Force - comprised of local, state and federal agencies - identified, investigated and prosecuted this woman who thought she was above the law."

Camarillo recruited many of her family members, including her children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews into the conspiracy. Camarillo paid the co-conspirators a portion of the money that she received either directly, or by paying bills or other obligations on their behalf. Camarillo admitted that three of her grandchildren were minors when they entered into the conspiracy, and that they were under age 18 when

they entered into their first marriages related to the conspiracy.

Foreign nationals paid as much as \$12,000 for these arranged marriages. There was an organized deception by the defendants to make the fraudulent marriages appear legitimate. Camarillo even coached the couples on how to make the marriage appear legitimate, including advising them to take photographs together and open joint bank accounts. She even provided the couple a list of possible questions they might be asked at the immigration interview, and she advised them to practice answering the questions.

Couples filed their applications for permanent residence with USCIS using fraudulently obtained, legitimate documents which showed their marriages were valid. To further evade detection, Camarillo provided some defendants who were citizen spouses, fraudulent identities, including false names, dates of birth and Social Security numbers. Camarillo admitted that about 13 fraudulent identities were used during the course of the conspiracy by various members of the conspiracy.

Camarillo admitted that after a foreign national made initial contact with a member of the conspiracy, she usually met with the foreign national in her office behind her house in Fort Worth. During the meeting, or soon after, the foreign national paid half of the arranged fee to Camarillo. Then, Camarillo selected one of the U.S. citizen coconspirators, of the appropriate age and gender, to marry and petition for the alien. The selected spouse usually met the foreign national for the first time when they applied for a marriage license and again for the actual wedding ceremony, which was normally officiated by a Justice of the Peace.

Assistant U.S. Attorneys Charles Brown and Amy Mitchell, Northern District of Texas, prosecuted this case.

-- ICE --

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) was established in March 2003 as the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security. ICE is comprised of five integrated divisions that form a 21st century law enforcement agency with broad responsibilities for a number of key homeland security priorities.

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