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FEBRUARY 11, 2013 CHICAGO, IL

2 in Chicago area indicted in alleged marriage fraud conspiracy

CHICAGO — A suburban immigration consultant is among two defendants arrested last week after being indicted for allegedly conspiring to arrange sham marriages to evade immigration laws and enable foreign nationals to illegally become U.S. permanent residents. The pair allegedly arranged at least four fraudulent marriages and attempted to arrange a fifth between a foreign national and an undercover special agent who was posing as a private U.S. citizen.

These charges resulted from an investigation conducted by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) and its partner agencies on the Chicago Document and Benefit Fraud Task Force, which includes U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service's Fraud Detection and National Security Unit.

Teresita Zarrabian, 60, a naturalized U.S. citizen residing in Des Plaines, and Michael Smith, 41, a U.S. citizen residing in Bellwood, were charged in a seven-count indictment that was returned Jan. 31 and unsealed when they were arrested Feb. 7. They are each charged with conspiracy to commit marriage fraud, marriage fraud and visa fraud. Zarrabian, the owner of Zarrabian and Associates, an immigration consulting business in Arlington Heights, was also charged with obstructing justice.

Zarrabian and Smith pleaded not guilty when they appeared Thursday and Friday, respectively, in district court. They were released on their own recognizance.

"Marriage fraud is a serious crime that exploits our nation's immigration system and poses a vulnerability to our security," said Gary Hartwig, special agent in charge of HSI Chicago. "HSI will continue its efforts to identify and arrest individuals whose actions show a complete disregard for U.S. immigration laws, which undermines the legitimate immigration process."

According to the indictment, between 2005 and 2012, Zarrabian assisted foreign-born clients to complete the necessary forms to become U.S. permanent residents based on marriage to a U.S. citizen. Clients paid Zarrabian between \$8,000 and \$15,000 in exchange for arranging fraudulent marriages to U.S. citizens recruited by Zarrabian and Smith, the charges allege.

Foreign nationals who marry U.S. citizens legitimately may lawfully become U.S. permanent residents, but not if the marriage is a sham to evade immigration laws.

Zarrabian allegedly paid Smith a portion of the money she received from foreign-born clients for Smith's recruited U.S. citizen spouses. In turn, Zarrabian allegedly promised to pay about \$5,000 to the U.S. citizen spouses for their participation in a sham marriage. Both defendants arranged to have individuals travel to Las Vegas for a fraudulent wedding and also took photos of the "couple" and other steps to create the false impression that the sham marriages were legitimate. Zarrabian also met with the couples and told them what actions they needed to take to make their marriages appear legitimate during marriage interviews with officials, according to the indictment.

The obstruction count alleges that Zarrabian attempted to persuade a U.S. citizen involved in a fraudulent marriage from communicating information to law enforcement.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Tony Iweagwu, Northern District of Illinois, is prosecuting the case.

Conspiracy to commit marriage fraud and each count of marriage fraud carry a maximum penalty of five years in prison and a \$250,000 fine. Visa fraud carries a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine. The obstruction count against Zarrabian carries a maximum of 20 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine.

The public is reminded that an indictment contains only charges and is not evidence of guilt. The defendants are presumed innocent and are entitled to a fair trial at which the government has the burden of proving guilt beyond a reasonable doubt.

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