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Restaurant owner faces deportation

Friends say he tried to become legal through proper process

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The future of a popular east-side restaurant, and the family behind it, is in question in light of the owner's pending deportation to Mexico.

Rufo Roman, who owns Mexico Lindo East with his wife, Rita, is being held in a Charleston County facility awaiting deportation. Rufo pleaded guilty Oct. 31 to re-entry of a deported alien but had admitted his illegal status on immigration forms several years ago as part of the process to gain permanent residency status and paid a \$1,000 fine, his wife said.

Friends petitioned on his behalf, describing him as an otherwise law-abiding businessman trying to stay with his family through what he thought were the correct channels.

"We tried to do it right to the best of our ability," said Rita, a native of Lebanon and a U.S. citizen. "The government never told us we did anything wrong until five years later. We paid the dues. We told them everything, to the best of our knowledge.

"We're very sorry he entered the country illegally, but we tried to rectify it by making him legal."

'Unfortunate'

The Romans were married in 2002 in the United States. Rita has one daughter, 11-year-old Nawal, whom Rufo, a Mexican national, helped raise since she was 3. He was head chef at the restaurant, which has hosted Spartanburg County Republican Party events, monthly chats with U.S. Rep. Bob

Inglis and charity functions, including free dinners for the needy and fundraisers.

County Democratic Party Chairwoman and former U.S. Rep. Liz Patterson, who lobbied on Rufo's behalf, called the way the case was handled unfortunate. "He's a successful businessman here in town and has been trying to get his green card for a number of years and did not realize he was in violation of the law," she said.

Patterson said she was disturbed to learn immigration officials wouldn't allow the Roman family to pay for a flight to Mexico, where Rufo could begin application for residency, but rather are keeping him in custody at taxpayers' expense.

The timing behind why immigration officials arrested Rufo on Aug. 21 of this year remains unclear. According to court papers, he tried to enter the country in 1999 using false documents and was denied entry. He later entered illegally and was deported in 2001. He returned and applied to register as a permanent resident to join his wife.

According to an affidavit from an immigration agent, Rufo falsely stated he had never been deported or tried to enter the country by fraudulent means, leading to federal charges of illegal re-entry and making false statements on immigration forms. Prosecutors later dismissed the false statements charge, and he was sentenced to time served and deportation for illegal re-entry.

Rita said her husband never intended to lie to officials and relied in part on an Atlanta agency specializing in immigration cases to complete the documents. She doesn't know when he'll be returned to Mexico.

'Difficult case'

Inglis, R-S.C., said his office helped the Romans pursue available options but isn't allowed to help represent the family in court. "It's just a very difficult case because of some alleged infractions, and, if proven, those infractions are going to make it very difficult for him to return," he said, calling the case a "very compelling human tragedy."

"They work hard," Inglis added. "They've built a successful business, and then they've got these allegations of immigration infractions. So that's the hard reality of the immigration debate, is real people who have worked really hard but didn't have proper documentation could end up being sent home."

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement spokeswoman Ernestine Fobbs said she couldn't comment on the case but noted a person who disputes allegations by immigration agents has the right to argue the case in court. "They are entitled to due process of the law, so they would have every opportunity to go before a judge and plead their particular case," she said.

Meanwhile, Rita is waiting for her husband to return to Mexico and apply for residency, but it's been difficult for her to even eat or sleep for the simple cause of separation from her husband.

"We are not bad people," she said. "We are public servants."

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