

American citizenship on the horizon

Ex-meatpacking plant worker remains on track

By Mark Pattison
Catholic News Service

POSTVILLE, Iowa (CNS) — Elmer Herrera was detained, but not detained in the same way other immigrant residents of Postville were a year ago.

Herrera, instead of being in his adopted hometown of Postville April 21 for a scheduled interview with Catholic News Service, was being interviewed four hours away, in Des Moines, with federal immigration officials, to see if he was worthy of being considered for U.S. citizenship. Herrera's American-born wife, Jennifer, was interviewed separately by federal immigration officials to make sure theirs wasn't a sham marriage in order for Herrera to gain citizenship.

Before the afternoon was over, Herrera called with good news: He passed his interview. His path to U.S. citizenship was still clear, and if things continue to go according to plan he could take a citizenship oath as early as 2012.

"Thank God" was Herrera's reaction, he told CNS once back in Postville from Des Moines.

Herrera, who had been a grade-school teacher in his native Guatemala, had been invited to leave his homeland at the point of a gun about 15 years ago as Guatemala's drawn-out civil war was nearing its end. He left behind two young daughters, both of whom are now college-age.



Elmer Herrera smiles as his wife Jennifer looks on during an interview with a CNS reporter at KPVL-FM radio in Postville, Iowa, April 21. Elmer was an employee of the Agriprocessors plant in Postville prior to the May 12, 2008, immigration raid at the plant. (CNS/Bob Roller)

His first destination was Canada, where he learned French while living in Toronto. He then came to the United States in 1996 to improve his English skills, and had worked at Agriprocessors, the kosher meatpacking plant in Postville, for a few years.

After the raid last May 12, which included 389 arrests inside the plant, Agriprocessors' owners and managers were hit with federal and state charges of falsifying workers' identities, wage violations and loan defaults.

Herrera said he often acted as an intermediary for workers in their dealings with plant management. "For three years I tried to talk to the ownership" but they did not listen, he said. He later tried to organize a union for workers inside the plant but did not succeed.

He quit Agriprocessors and opened a bakery and cafe to cater to Postville's Hispanic community. Even though he was no longer in the plant, workers came to him for help and advice. "People need help, I try to help them," he told CNS.

The bakery flourished. While working at the bakery, he met Jennifer. "It was love at first sight" for Elmer Herrera, he said, but it took Jennifer, with a school-age daughter of her own, a while to warm up to her future husband.

Love eventually blossomed, and the couple built their own house together. Not long afterward, "he popped the question at the bakery," Jennifer added. Father Paul Ouder Kirk performed the wedding last year.

Herrera's helping hand has extended even to some Palauan immigrants who came to Agriprocessors last fall to replace Hispanic workers sacked after the raid. They had little money after Agriprocessors docked their wages to pay for the \$1,900 airfare from Palau. What's more, the Palauans had no warm clothing and no place to sleep. Herrera let all 10 Palauans stay inside his new house and fed them.

His generosity has stretched his wallet thin. He sends money to Guatemala to pay for his daughters' college education. The house is new and still must be paid for. Meanwhile, Herrera had to close the bakery when business dropped off following the raid. Now he makes another trek of nearly four hours, but this time to get to work; he is an organizer for the United Food and Commercial Workers union in Austin, Minn.

Herrera wants to increase the educational opportunities available to Postville's immigrant population. "Most of the Spanish community that came here didn't finish their education," he said. "This is my dream, I want to do something for my people."