

American dream still alive for detainees

One year later, women detained in Postville raid persevere, carry on

By Mark Pattison
Catholic News Service

POSTVILLE, Iowa (CNS) — When Marta Veronica Cumez Solovi was driven to the Agriprocessors meatpacking plant in Postville where she once worked, she said she had a sense of dread about going back there.

“I was rethinking about all those things that had happened,” Solovi, a native of Guatemala, said through an interpreter.

Solovi, 33, now in the United States for three years, was one of 389 people arrested by U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement last May in one of the biggest raids to seize undocumented immigrants.



Marta Veronica Cumez Solovi, a member of St. Bridget Parish in Postville, Iowa, poses outside the Agriprocessors plant in Postville April 22. Solovi was an employee at the plant during the May 12, 2008, immigration raid. (CNS photo/Bob Roller)

She was detained and processed, but, after nearly one year, still not tried. In exchange for some measure of freedom while she awaits trial, Solovi must wear an ankle bracelet with a GPS system inside so

federal authorities can monitor her movements. But she is not allowed to work.

Solovi and scores of others have taken refuge — sometimes physically, sometimes spiritually — at St. Bridget Church in Postville. The parish has tried to ration nearly \$1 million in donations received to help workers from Agriprocessors — arrested or not — pay rent, utilities and living expenses.

In gratitude, Solovi, a member of the parish, and other immigrant women prepare lunch every day for the staff and volunteers at St. Bridget. It is their way of saying thank you to those who have helped them through tough times.

Janet Rafael, another former Agriprocessors worker, was not caught up in the raid. She was not scheduled to work the morning shift when the ICE raid took place. But her husband was arrested and scheduled for deportation to his native Guatemala. Although Rafael kept working, Agriprocessors abruptly closed the plant Nov. 14, crushed under the weight of investigations into its labor and financial practices, plus a multitude of criminal charges against the owners.

Rafael, 25, from Mexico, and her husband met at the plant. They have been married three years and are the parents of a 2-year-old son, Yordi — a U.S. citizen since he was born on American soil.

“My son is full of energy,” she told Catholic News Service through an interpreter April 22 as Yordi scampered about in one room of the parish house.

The Rafael family too has been helped by the staff at St. Bridget. Perhaps the best news for Janet Rafael was that her husband’s deportation was delayed, and may be canceled, as he was brought back to Iowa to serve as a federal witness for some of the criminal trials involving Agriprocessors.

Rafael said she and her husband have talked about whether it makes more sense to relocate to Guatemala or Mexico. But if she had her choice, she’d stay in Iowa — but maybe not Postville. “Somewhere bigger, where there’s more work,” she said.



Mary Klauke, archdiocesan coordinator for rural life and community development, embraces Elvira Esparza after Esparza received her employment authorization card at the rectory of St. Bridget Church in Postville, Iowa, April 22. Esparza had been detained since the raid at the Agriprocessors plant in Postville May 12, 2008. The card allows her to seek employment in the U.S. while she waits for the next step of her citizenship process. (CNS photo/Bob Roller)

Rafael would also like to move to bigger living quarters than the apartment where they live now.

But she wept openly in talking about the hope that her husband’s return to testify will grant him immunity from deportation so they can stay in the United States. Tearing up, Rafael said, “I can’t say how big it is” to be reunited with family.

Elvira Esparza, another woman detained in the Agriprocessors raid, has not yet been completely cleared, but after 11-plus months, she has advanced far enough through the judicial system to qualify for an employment authorization card. Although work is hard to come by in Postville itself, Iowa’s unemployment rate is under 6 percent, well below the national average.

Solovi, who has three daughters, has no desire to return to Guatemala. “There are lots of people (there) who rob and hurt other people,” she said.

She wants to stay so her daughters can get a better education and a better chance in life.

And her own dream?

“Trabajar,” she said.

To work.

Tuesday, May 12, marks the first anniversary of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Agency raid in Postville, Iowa. A nationwide day of remembrance has been declared to promote awareness of the devastating effects of raids. See www.postvillestbridget.org and www.sistersunitednews.org/newsalerts