



Kurt Ellison

Magdalena Gonzalez, left, received a temporary work permit last night from Evangelina Guzman, a legal processor with CET. Watching are, from

left, Javier Diaz, Agueda Villalobos, Reyna Garcia and her daughter Mariana, Humberto Espinoza with his wife, Socorro, and Javier Ramirez.

Immigrants take first step toward legal residency

By JESSE CHAVARRIA
STAFF WRITER

Agueda Villalobos, Magdalena Gonzalez and Javier A. Ramirez felt optimistic and relieved, but were careful not to let it show too much.

The three had lived and worked in this country illegally for years, most of that time in Watsonville, and have learned to be cautious as a result.

Still, their guard down, smiles flashed across their faces last night when they received official, if only temporary, permission from the Immigration and Naturalization Service to legally work and live in the United States.

The three were among a group of people who, through the Watsonville Center for Employment Training (CET), obtained that permission under the amnesty program established by the new federal immigration law.

CET is one of several agencies in town authorized by the government to provide service to people applying for the program.

The service is not free. CET charges \$65 per adult and \$35 per child. That's in addition to the \$185 charged by the INS. But Villalobos, Gonzalez and Ramirez think it's worth it.

"I will no longer have the great fear, will no longer feel that tremor run through me, that the 'migra' will show up and take me away," said the 38-year-old Ramirez.

He's lived illegally in Watsonville for 10 years, doing mostly field work. "This will help me get a good job," he said. "That's the principal thing, to work."

Villalobos agreed. "Everything will be much easier now. I can work without fear and feel more confident and protected."

Villalobos, 22, has lived in Watsonville for seven years and has worked in the fields and in the frozen-food plants.

She and the others said they've never been mistreated on the job, but have always had to work with the knowledge that at any time they might be deported.

They also said they have been cautious about taking part in community activities because of their illegal status.

Villalobos said she and her compatriots submitted applications this week after gathering the necessary documentation. The next step is an interview with INS officials and, if everything checks out, they will be given temporary resident status.

After 18 months, they will be able to apply for permanent status, and within five years, they may qualify for citizenship.

Gonzalez, 23, said she was wary of the amnesty program at first. "You wonder if it's real, if, what the government is saying is true," she said.

She said she decided to apply once she found out that illegals who can prove they have been in the United States since before Jan. 1, 1982, are eligible for amnesty.

She said she had sufficient documentation and met the numerous requirements (including a medical exam and fingerprinting), so it was not difficult to apply.

Her advice to illegals who haven't yet applied is "Gather your documents together as soon as possible. The faster you do it, the faster you'll be able to apply and get work permits."

She and the others said other members of their families are applying for the program too and are hopeful everything will turn out fine.

Ramirez said the key to working with the program is information.

"The important thing here is to know, to know how this works and how it can help you," he said.

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forecast

Low clouds and fog, clearing afternoons.

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