LOTTERY

Bonus Match 5
Saturday, 2/19/05
05,10,11,16,37 (24)

Pick 4
Sunday, 2/20/05
D: 2,3,2,3

Pick 3
Sunday, 2/20/05
D: 3,3,9

Sniper witness fights to stay in U.S.

BY JONATHAN MARINO
Examiner Staff Writer

A Silver Spring immigrant who cooperated with authorities and testified in the Virginia Beach trial that led to the conviction of sniper John Muhammed has been met with sluggish efforts on the part of U.S. immigration officials in processing the paperwork that would allow him to remain here permanently.

Carlos Cruz Lopez, 42, who testified against Lee Malvo and John Muhammad after his wife was assassinated during the fall 2002 sniper spree, has been fighting since Sarah Ramos' death to achieve permanent residency in the U.S. Though legislation has been enacted that protects temporary residents who are working with authorities in a major criminal investigation and affords them the opportunity to remain on a visa, lagging implementation has left a widowed father in limbo.

Cruz Lopez was devastated when he was told Oct. 3, 2002, that his wife had been shot once in the head as she sat waiting on a curbside bench for a friend to pick her up.

"They were the most difficult months of my life," Cruz Lopez said of the time following his wife's shooting, through interpreter Carolyn Ann Killea.

Cruz Lopez, of El Salvador, almost immediately moved into his wife's family's home in Silver Spring following the shooting, where her surviving sisters now help him care for his 9-year-old son, Carlos. His new fight is not for sanity, it is to remain in the U.S., to afford his son the opportunity of an education, to forge a new life here despite the tragedy that met him and his son just over a year after their initial arrival.

Congress passed in 2000 a law allowing immigrants like him to stay when granted "temporary relief" residency status and work permits. Status like Cruz Lopez's is typically used in granting a person temporary haven as they await testifying in a major trial.

"Carlos is in a position where he can't leave the U.S.," Deutsch said. "If he does, he risks being kept out of the U.S. for years."

Deutsch said Cruz Lopez's and his son's case is unique at this point in time. Congress passed five years ago a law allowing for victims and witnesses of major felonies to be given "U" visas, which would eventually turn into permanent status. However, Deutsch said, the U.S. State Department has been dragging its heels in implementing the legislation. Without further prodding from lawmakers, Cruz Lopez is forced into a standstill. He must re-apply for the "temporary relief" annually, and may be denied at any point.

However, it is unlikely the U.S. government will force Cruz Lopez to leave. He testified against Malvo and Muhammad at Muhammad's Virginia Beach trial, and may be called upon for further testimony. He was not with his wife when she was shot.

Now, he is busy working with a small tax accounting firm in Montgomery County. Things will die down after this year's tax season wraps up; his checks only amount to $350 a week at this particular part-time job. And he must divide the money he earns between feeding himself and his son and paying for the schooling he gets at Howard County Community College, he said.

"I'm studying to learn English better," he said through his translator.

In the hardest of times, Cruz Lopez was visited nevertheless by a little luck. Blanca Kling, Montgomery County's victim services coordinator, took the fractured family under her wing, pushing them toward counseling and coordinating a funeral for Ramos on a state grant specifically set aside for criminal victims.

"I met him the night he lost his wife," Kling said. "He looked broken. He looked at me and said, 'She was the love of my life.' "

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BEFORE WINTER CAME BACK: Jesse El-Katib of Alexandria does a flip trick at the Powhatan skateboard park in Arlington, Va., on Thursday. – Andrew Harnik/Examiner

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