

Family divided at U.S. border reunited in Miami

A Cuban man has an emotional airport reunion after his Venezuelan-born wife and children are released from a Texas immigration detention center.

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Ocdalis Gomez, 22, and her children Abel, 2, and Winnelis, 6, arrive at Miami International Airport. They were detained in Texas after being stopped at the border coming over from Mexico. Gomez's husband Abel Gomez was allowed in because he is a Cuban refugee. Ocdalis and her children were not because they are Venezuelan.

Immigration authorities Friday abruptly released the Venezuelan-born wife and children of a Cuban refugee who was paroled into the country on the same day his family was put in deportation proceedings at the Texas-Mexico border.

An emotional Ocdalis Gómez, 22, and her children Abel, 2, and Winnelis, 6, immediately boarded a plane in Austin, Texas, bound for Miami, where they rejoined Abel Gómez, 30 -- the Cuban migrant who for weeks desperately tried to gain freedom for his family.

When Abel and Ocdalis reunited at Miami International Airport, the husband and wife held each other tightly for a few seconds while their children stared in awe at the television cameras trained on the family. Then Abel Gómez picked up the children, hugged and kissed them and proudly displayed one on each arm for the cameras.

"I'm immensely happy," he said when he finally was able to speak, tears rolling down his cheeks. "Thanks to God, I am now next to my family again."

The Gómez family showed up June 11 at a U.S.-Mexico border crossing near McAllen, Texas. As a Cuban, Abel was paroled into the country under the wet foot/dry foot policy, but Ocdalis and the children were detained and placed in deportation proceedings because they were non-Cuban foreign nationals arriving without papers.

Gómez is among an increasing number of Cubans arriving through the Mexican border. Figures released last week by U.S. Customs and Border Protection showed that 84 percent of all Cuban migrants last year came through Mexico rather than the Florida Straits. Cuban arrivals at the Mexican border have increased year by year amid intensified Coast Guard interdictions in waters between Cuba and Florida.

With a wide smile on her face, Ocdalis said Friday she was happy to be with her husband in Miami -- but added she also felt deep sorrow for other foreign families she came to know at the detention center who were left behind while she was freed.

"I am extremely happy, of course," she told reporters gathered at MIA. "But I also feel sadness."

She paused for several seconds and then burst into tears. "Some people qualify for bond and release, but because they don't have money for bond they are deported with their children," Ocdalis said, sobbing as she spoke. "It's very hard being there."

She said detention officials did not provide adequate medical care for her son. She said he had a persistent cough and he only got cough syrup. Carl Rusnok, a spokesman for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement in Dallas, said he "will look into the matter." She said her daughter got better care when she had an asthma attack.

Ocdalis said she was not sure if her deportation case is now over. She said officials told her to report to immigration court in Miami on Aug. 7.

Rusnok said her "case was reviewed, and based on the merits of the case it was determined that parole was warranted." Parole would make her eventually eligible for a green card under the Cuban Adjustment Act as the spouse of a Cuban citizen.

The Gómez case also has shed light on a little-known dimension of ongoing Cuban migrant arrivals: the growing number of mixed Cuban-Venezuelan families fleeing to the United States from President Hugo Chávez's government.

Abel Gómez said his family left Cuba for Venezuela in the early 1980s largely to escape Fidel Castro's communism. Gómez was 6 when his parents moved. He settled in eastern Venezuela, where he drove a vehicle transporting personnel and goods for a local business. His wife cooked and sold food.

Though Abel became Venezuelan, he kept his original Cuban birth certificate and presented a Cuban passport at the border.

The Gómez family began planning the journey north about a year ago. They boarded a plane to Mexico City on June 9 and two days later caught a plane to the border at Reynosa, Mexico. Once there they took a cab to McAllen.

After Gómez was allowed in, his wife and children were taken to a detention center for undocumented foreign families at Taylor.

Ocdalis said an immigration official who previously had told her she would be deported came to see her Thursday night and announced she was being released.

Asked what she planned to do now, Ocdalis smiled and said: "Many things. Above all, plan and dream again."