

Deported migrant activist vows to continue fight in Mexico

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TIJUANA, Mexico --

For the past year, Elvira Arellano has promoted an overhaul of U.S. immigration laws from inside a Chicago church, where the undocumented immigrant sought refuge to avoid being separated from her U.S.-born son.

Now, after being deported Sunday by U.S. immigration officials, she is trying to stir sympathy from within her native Mexico.

Less than 24 hours after being deported, Arellano huddled with about a dozen activists to plan her next steps in Tijuana, just across the border from San Diego and only about 100 miles from where she entered the United States illegally in 1997. Her plans included a talk-radio show appearance Tuesday, a news conference at City Hall on Thursday and a rally Sept. 12.

"I have a fighting spirit, and I'm going to continue to fight," Arellano, 32, said outside the second-floor apartment where she is living with a friend. Her 8-year-old son Saul will stay in Chicago with his godmother.

Arellano's supporters liken her to Rosa Parks, who sparked the civil rights movement, and Dolores Huerta, who co-founded United Farm Workers of America. Outsiders say that's a stretch and note that she cannot yet stake claim to any change in U.S. policy.

While some Americans sympathize with Arellano, who held low-wage jobs as a single mother, others consider her a trespasser.

Peter Nuñez, a former federal prosecutor who teaches immigration policy at University of San Diego, called Arellano's campaign a media-driven effort that overlooks that she came to the United States illegally and chose to have a child.

"She and her sympathizers expect America to absolve her of her misconduct because she had a kid," he said. "Fine, take your kid back with you. That's what mothers do."

Arellano tells a story that is, in many ways, typical of the estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants currently living in the United States.

In 1997, she left Maravatio, a town in Mexico's western state of Michoacán, where she earned the equivalent of \$30 a week as a secretary. Her parents still run a variety store there.

She worked for a year at an electronics factory in Reynosa, across the border from McAllen, Texas, making \$60 for six days of work a week. Then she hired a smuggler to walk her across the border near Calexico, Calif.

"It's very difficult to find work with a dignified salary [in Mexico]," she said in an interview. "I made a decision to seek a better future in the United States, to have a better life and better work."

Arellano lived for three years in Yakima, Wash., where she worked at a laundry, cared for children and gave birth to her only child. She moved to Chicago in 2000, where she made \$6.50 an hour cleaning airplanes for a contractor at O'Hare International Airport until her arrest in an immigration sting in 2002. She earned about \$1,000 a month cleaning houses as her case wound through immigration courts.

When she was scheduled to surrender to immigration authorities, she took refuge Aug. 15, 2006, at the Adalberto United Methodist Church in Chicago. She left there last week for a publicity tour that took her to California, where immigration authorities arrested her near a Los Angeles church. She was swiftly deported.

In Mexico, Arellano plans to campaign for legal status for illegal immigrants in the United States and against stepped-up enforcement by U.S. immigration authorities, which has caused many families to be separated, including hers.

Arellano has inspired the New Sanctuary Movement, which is arranging church accommodations for illegal immigrants nationwide. Eight have made their presence publicly known in Los Angeles, New York, San Diego and Seattle, according to the Rev. Alexia Salvatierra, a leader in movement.

It is difficult to know if Arellano would be more effective from the Chicago church than in Mexico, Salvatierra said.

"Her voice is a pretty strong voice wherever she uses it."