

CITIZEN STRUGGLES FOR PROOF LOST PAPERS: NATURALIZED AS A CHILD, PALO ALTO WOMAN'S ATTEMPTS TO OBTAIN PASSPORT LED TO BUREAUCRATIC NIGHTMARE.

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Body

Dianne Bradley is certain there are other immigrants out there about to stumble onto the citizenship nightmare she did.

She tells her cautionary tale for those who go through life thinking they are American citizens and one day discover they don't have the legal paper to prove it.

"My life is kind of on hold until I get some kind of proof of who I am," said Bradley, a mother of two who lives in Palo Alto. "I feel kind of like a nomad right now."

Bradley immigrated to the United States with her parents from the Netherlands in 1957. She was 3 years old.

In 1962, her parents became naturalized citizens. Because she and an older sister were minors, they automatically became naturalized citizens, too. "My whole life is in the United States, where I've lived, had my children, made my place," said Bradley, an account coordinator for Intuit. "This is my home. It's absurd that after all these years, I don't have the right to travel, come and go as I please."

Bradley, 46, had planned a cruise to the Caribbean with her daughter for her 17th birthday in June. After four decades in the country, Bradley needed a passport for the first time. The cruise would cross into international waters, the travel agent told her.

That's when Bradley learned she can't get a passport because she can't prove she's a U.S. citizen. She's missing her citizenship papers.

A search through old files of her parents, now deceased, yielded no help.

"Every single document exists except for the naturalization papers," she said.

Not knowing where to turn, she started with the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

"That's when the nightmare really began," said Bradley, a patient and organized woman who has kept a mini-diary recording her interactions with the immigration office.

After standing in line for two mornings at the immigration office in San Jose, she had been given three different versions of what she needed to do: get a green card, get an application for citizenship and get a verification application of citizenship.

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Then there was the G639, the Freedom of Information-Privacy Act Report. And yet another form to seek confirmation from the New Jersey court that naturalized her family.

This week, she logged on the Internet and downloaded the N565, an application for a replacement of a citizenship certificate.

Time, however, has run out and Bradley has canceled the birthday present. The cruise would have started on her daughter's 17th birthday, June 24.

"We were just so psyched for this," she said. "This ship was just huge, the ship we were going on."

Immigration attorney Robert Mautino said it's hard to say how many other child immigrants, now grown, may not have hung on to their citizenship papers. "There are a lot of children who are naturalized at the time their parents are," said Mautino, of San Diego, who specializes in citizenship laws.

While many families recognize the importance of keeping naturalization records in a secure place, some may have lost track of them over the years because they were rarely asked to furnish them, he said.

Although there is a heightened awareness of immigration issues today, immigrants who arrived in the 1940s and '50s came by boat and their legal status to stay was rarely questioned, said Mautino.

"Once people got here, there was no need for documents inside the country," Mautino said. "So people could live and work and do everything they wanted to do here without any need for documents."

Bradley knows she was naturalized with her parents because her older sister has a copy of her citizenship certificate, dated May 25, 1962.

She's not the first to have lost her paperwork. The INS Northern California district office gets more than 1,000 applications for replacement of citizenship papers a year, said INS spokeswoman Sharon Rummery.

"This might pose a cautionary tale for parents who have naturalized to be certain to hand the papers down to their children," she said.

What has held up Bradley's request is that the INS computerized its database only as far back as the mid-'60s. Her files likely were archived and those searches can take more than a year, Rummery said.

"If a person entered in the '60s or before, it's possible there is no record of that reflected in the computers," she said.

Meanwhile, Bradley has sought assistance from Rep. Anna Eshoo, D-Palo Alto.

Eshoo's chief of staff, John Flaherty, said Friday the congresswoman "got the (INS) logjam unjammed. Dianne is expected to receive a letter some time next week confirming she's a naturalized citizen," Flaherty said.

"There are probably more than a few people who take the evidence of their citizenship for granted," he said. "They haven't had to produce the documents, haven't had to apply for a passport. Our advice is everyone reading this (should) go look for their papers."

Notes

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Graphic

Photo;

PHOTO: RICHARD KOCI HERNANDEZ -- MERCURY NEWS

As a child, Dianne Bradley of Palo Alto became a naturalized citizen with her immigrant parents, but without her papers, she has had trouble finding proof to obtain a passport.

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