

Newsday, April 25, 2004

DESPERATE MEASURES

An undocumented immigrant agreed to take part in a smuggling ring to pay off his debt, but the plan backfired. Now he fears for his life

BY BRYAN VIRASAMI
STAFF WRITER

Steve Jang's journey started six years ago with a dream. But a desperate deal with smugglers three months ago to reunite with his children has left the former Queens man in the middle of a nightmare.

Jang, 43, says he's too afraid to run, too afraid to turn himself in and becoming more convinced that his only option may be going back to his native South Korea, either willingly or forcibly.

Like millions of people in the United States, Jang is an undocumented immigrant living below the radar. After he entered the United States illegally through the Canadian border in 1998, Jang carved out a simple life in Queens and later moved to Connecticut, he said.

Eventually, his deep desire to see his children - whom he could not bring here legally - caused him to enlist the services of smugglers, he said. And later, they leveraged his debt to them to get him involved in their schemes, he said.

When an unexpected arrest put a crack in the smuggling setup recently, Jang found himself looking over both his shoulders - fearing either retribution from vengeful smugglers for his apparent misstep or punishment from law enforcement.

"I'm not a criminal enterprise, I'm not making money from this," Jang said, referring to the deal. "I know they're going to come after me, I'm really afraid, I can't sleep. I'm afraid to go back to my house."

Few options

Despite his fears, Jang now believes his only option may be to cooperate with law enforcement, and reluctantly he agreed to speak out in the hope he'll gain some help for his plight.

Immigrant advocates say that while Jang's case is extreme, it illustrates the desperate measures people go through to live in the United States, especially as entry for foreigners becomes more difficult.

Criminals can spot the desperation, too, preying upon immigrants with limited options, offering them solutions in turn for becoming their pawns in much bigger schemes.

"There's a hell of a lot of people out there who are in desperate situations, who want to get legalized," said attorney Stan Mark, program director at the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund in Manhattan.

Jang's story began more than a decade ago when he brought his then-wife to the United States to be treated for a rare medical problem. A visa allowed him to stay five years.

He then returned to South Korea. But facing an economic recession there, and divorced from his wife, he decided to return alone to the United States. He was turned down for a visitor's visa, he said, so he entered the country illegally, he said.

After settling in Connecticut, he wanted to reunite with his children. Since he was undocumented, he couldn't bring his kids here legally, so he tapped into a smuggling network through a distant relative in Canada, he said.

Three months ago, Jang agreed to pay \$7,500 for Canadian smugglers to bring his son, 10, and daughter, 13, across the border near Seattle, he said.

Jang said he paid \$4,000 once his kids arrived, but he's been unable to pay off the remainder because he makes a small salary working for a jeweler. His pleas to buy more time from the smugglers were rejected, he said.

Veiled threats

Then Jang said the smugglers began to call him several times a day, issuing veiled threats. On one occasion, a man in Canada offered Jang details about his four-family home and told him exactly in which room he lives and also mentioned his work address.

Terrified, Jang said he agreed to a plan to pay off the debt: He would hire two cars to go to the upstate town of Cannon's Corner, N.Y., to pick up eight women who crossed the border illegally on foot, in a plan orchestrated by smugglers.

The plan called only for him to organize the transportation, he said. Jang said it was no secret the women were heading to work in bars in Flushing, Atlanta and other cities, where owners often pay smugglers up to about \$15,000 per woman. The women then must work off the debt to the bar owners.

In some cases, the women are led to believe they'll be working as waitresses with the potential of large tips, but they are forced to become "bar girls," which sometimes involves prostitution, law enforcement officials say.

Jang said he realized his involvement came with risks, but they were insignificant compared with the threats he was facing, he said.

So he hired the two drivers, who were expecting to be paid \$500 each. When the women were delivered, Jang was to be free of his debt.

According to criminal complaints filed in U.S. District Court in Albany, law enforcement officers at a checkpoint stopped two cars traveling in North Hudson about 8 a.m. on April 10, about 90 minutes from the border. There were four women in each car.

Myung Woo Jun, 54, of Bayside and Jin Kyoo Park, 56, of Jackson Heights were the drivers and are now being held on violation of federal immigration laws. Bail was set for the pair at a hearing Friday, but it was unclear whether they had posted it.

An implication

During interviews, they told investigators they were told by a man in Connecticut, who arranged for the cars, to say that the women had been on vacation in Niagara Falls, N.Y. and were returning to Flushing. But the women, the complaints said, crossed the border and were waiting for the drivers to drive them to Flushing.

During an interview in Flushing last week, Jang said he saw a story in a Korean-language newspaper about two drivers and eight women being detained and arrested near the border. He realized that man in Connecticut that the drivers referred to was him.

"My hands were shaking," he said. "I was thinking about my kids, my fiancée."

On one hand, Jang thinks about fleeing, but he doesn't want to force his kids into a life on the road. He's engaged to a woman he met in Connecticut, where he and his children live.

On the other hand, he's considered coming forward and confessing with the hopes of getting a deal that would allow him to stay here.

His worst fear is that the smugglers may want to silence him.

"I'm willing to do anything to not get separated with my kids," Jang said. "Anything."

When he called the Canadian smuggler, he was told not to worry, he said.

"'You just keep quiet', he said it's nothing,'" Jang said he was told. "If people come after me I can't split because I have kids."

Thousands caught

Joseph Mellia, assistant chief for the U.S. Border Patrol based in Swanton, Vt., said that each year, agents in upstate New York pick up between 3,000 and 4,000 people, many of whom

cross on foot through woods.

While he was unable to speak on this specific case since it's pending in court, Mellia said organized crime is behind most of the human smuggling, and they're all breaking the law whether based in New York, Canada or elsewhere.

"There's got to be arrangers in Canada and Korea and people in the United States," he said. "And there's got to be people picking them up and facilitating their entry into the United States."

James Eiss, a former immigration officer and now a defense attorney in Buffalo, said people like Jang may be targeted for their roles and risk deportation unless they agree to testify in court or provide useful information on leaders of the rings.

As for Jang's fear of the smugglers, Eiss said it's not unfounded since many of the smugglers are out to protect their business.

"It has been taken over by gangs that are willing to mete out punishment for anyone that breaks the code of silence," he said.

On Thursday, Jang said after the story of his troubles appeared in the Queens-based Korea Times, his boss fired him. And he's unsure what his next move will be.

He said, "I need help but I'm very scared."

This article was the Sunday cover story in Newsday