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**Red tape keeps couple apart; Tight immigration laws leave a Bayville man and his Mexican wife unsure of when they'll reunite**

**BY BART JONES. STAFF WRITER**

The married couple eats dinner in front of their webcams. That way at least they can see each other.

He lives in Bayville; she lives in Mexico City. They met on Long Island and were married 18 months ago, but because of what they say is immigration service red tape, she can't join him in the United States.

"I'm destroyed," a sobbing Cyndy Rosales Ergen, 36, said in a telephone interview from Mexico City this week. "I try to be strong for Ron because he needs me strong, but it's hard. We're married but we're separated."

Her husband, Ron Ergen, a warehouse worker in Syosset, said he can't understand what went wrong, and is racking up bills traveling back and forth to Mexico. They were married in Mexico - in a civil ceremony in September 2004 and a church wedding in April 2005 - and thought they would have been reunited in the United States long ago.

"I've played by the rules they've set and I'm not getting anywhere," Ergen, 40, said, adding he thought the process would take a year at the most. "I'd like a straight answer. I feel like I'm being taken for a ride here."

Shawn Saucier, a spokesman at the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services office in Vermont, where the Ergens' application was processed initially, said he could not comment on the case because of privacy laws. But he said delays generally occur because "we need to be sure a relationship that an immigration benefit is based on is legitimate, and in some cases this takes time. Our goal is to be able to do all of these within six months, and we are getting better."

Immigration experts said the Ergens' case is a classic example of a system coping with stricter, time-consuming requirements imposed after the September 2001 terrorist attacks and Congress' failure to adequately fund immigration offices and U.S. consulates overseas such as the one in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. All applicants for immigrant visas, for instance, must now go through a face-to-face interview, something not always required in the past, said Robert Deasy of the American Immigration Lawyers Association in Washington, D.C.

"What we are experiencing at Juarez is an excellent example of overload," said Deasy, who added that the processing time for the Ergens' case is not unusual.

The consulate where the Ergens are processing their application is the busiest in the world, according to the State Department. With added staff, the consulate was able to nearly double the number of visas - from 16,000 to 30,000 - it processed between October 2004 and January 2005 and October 2005 to January 2006, according to the department.

The Ergens said their case took eight months to process at the immigration service's Vermont Service Center, and then was passed to the consulate in Ciudad Juarez, where it arrived in July.

Distraught by the delays, they said they are working to keep the marriage intact. In addition to the dinners-by-webcam, they talk on the telephone daily and exchange e-mail constantly.

Ergen said none of his family or friends could attend his wedding in Mexico, so if his wife makes it to the United States, he plans to have a third wedding with a reception at a place such as the Knights of Columbus hall because he doesn't have much money left. He hopes that plan inspires her not to give up.

"She's becoming a real basket case," Ergen said.