Unreadable fingerprints stymie citizens-to-be

FBI, INS say pattern too fine to approve

BY ARTHUR SANTANA
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This much is clear: Pushp Grover desperately wants to become a U.S. citizen.

Less clear are the tiny whorls and ridges that make up her fingerprint patterns.

That, in the eyes of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), has been grounds for not granting citizenship over the past year.

The INS says it needs the prints for its files. The FBI, which examines the prints, says they're unreadable despite repeated attempts.

Meanwhile, Grover, 53, who has lived in the United States for 27 years, including the past six in Everett, has become increasingly frustrated with the process.

"I passed my test. I passed my interview. I took the oath, and I was told I'd get the citizenship, but I didn't get it because of my fingerprints," she said. "I've never heard of such a thing."

Grover is a native of India who immigrated to the U.S. from England with her husband, Kumar. She is one of a small fraction of immigrants that the INS says are denied citizenship because of their fingerprints.

The INS, however, will start a policy next Monday that will allow those with fingerprints deemed unreadable to still gain citizenship if they can prove they have had a clean police record for the past five years.

That wouldn't appear to be a big problem for Grover and other law-abiding immigrants.

Immigrants must live in the United States at least five years before applying for citizenship, so they would need to contact police agencies only in the places they have lived in the U.S. Cost for copying the needed documents should be minimal, local authorities said.

But Grover is skeptical. She learned of the new policy only this past week when told of it by a reporter. The INS, she said, had told her nothing about it.

"I'm not optimistic about it at all," Grover said. "So far, everything they've told me hasn't happened. They've always kept us in the dark."

She has asked for help from the office of U.S. Rep. Jack Metcalf, R-Langley. Metcalf aide Fairalee Markusen became involved in Grover's case in October and said she, too, is frustrated with the process.

Recently, Markusen set up a fingerprinting session for Grover at the INS headquarters in Seattle, requesting that the prints be specially delivered to the FBI office in Clarksburg, W.Va., where prints of all citizenship applicants are sent. They are waiting for a response.

Graver's fingertips, upon close inspection, clearly have prints. The ridges are just very fine and, according to the INS, have an "insufficient pattern area."

It's a similar story for Bothell resident Zenaida Prodigalidad, 58, who immigrated to the U.S. from the Philippines 30 years ago and began seeking citizenship last October.

Both women say they don't do anything out of the ordinary with their hands, and neither has scleroderma, a skin disease that can render fingerprints unreadable.

Abnormal fingerprint development, which is rare, typically happens early in a person's life, said Bellevue dermatologist Julie Francis.

"We have fingerprints due to the development of our sweat glands in
Woman applied 10 times

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our fingerpads early in life. If someone has abnormal sweat glands, which can occur, they might not have clear fingerprints," she said.

Prodigalidad, who works as a cashier in Lynnwood, decided last year she wanted to vote and applied for citizenship. Last year, Grover, a customer-service representative at a Seattle insurance company, signed up for a 10-week citizenship class at Edmonds Community College and submitted her fingerprints to the FBI. But a week before her swearing-in ceremony, she received a letter saying her fingerprints had been rejected. Over the next nine months, she submitted her prints nine more times — each time costing $15.

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