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Entrant who aided boy gets Grijalva's help

By Brady McCombs

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An illegal border crosser whom officials credit with saving the life of a 9-year-old boy he encountered in the desert on Thanksgiving night has been given a chance — albeit with long odds — to obtain a green card.

Rep. Raúl Grijalva, D-Ariz., submitted a private bill Thursday asking Congress to approve a green card for Manuel Jesus Córdova Soberanes, 26, of Magdalena de Kino, Sonora. If approved, it would make Córdova eligible to become a legal permanent resident, and that could eventually lead to citizenship.

The bill would specifically exclude Córdova's parents and siblings from becoming eligible for green cards if he is granted a green card.

While there exists some strong public sentiment to help Córdova acquire a visa — a strong factor in Grijalva's decision to draft the bill — not everybody agrees that Córdova's actions warrant a special visa.

Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, D-Ariz., doesn't support the private bill, said her spokesman, C.J. Karamargin.

"Rep. Giffords considers Manuel Jesus Cordova Soberanes a hero," he said. "She supports the spirit of congressman Grijalva's request and believes that Mr. Córdova Soberanes deserve our thanks and admiration. But the congresswoman does not support making exceptions to immigration laws."

The bill has been assigned to the U.S. House subcommittee on immigration, citizenship, refugees, border security and international law, said Gloria Montañó, Grijalva's chief of staff. The earliest it would be addressed would be the beginning of the next session, which is scheduled to begin in mid-January.

Private bills, which deal with individual matters such as claims against the federal government, immigration and naturalization cases, usually struggle to get through Congress, Grijalva said. This year, about 160 private bills — most concerning immigration — have been introduced, Montañó said. Only about two or three are usually passed each year, she said.

"It's a long shot, but it's a shot," said Montañó.

If the bill has a chance, it will because the story has garnered international attention, she said.

"Not just in the United States and Mexico, but in Europe, Australia, etc.," Montañó said. "I think it's just the humanitarian part of it that has reached people."

Córdova's moment of fame began at about 5 p.m. Thanksgiving evening west of Peña Blanca Lake, about 60 miles southwest of Tucson, when authorities say he encountered Christopher in shorts and a T-shirt walking with his golden retriever, Tanner.

Christopher and his mother, Dawn Alice Tomko, 45, had been camping in the area. While driving on a narrow dirt road, she lost control of their van, hit an embankment, and the vehicle fell about 275 feet off a cliff. She died. Christopher and his dogs walked away with only bumps and bruises.

Córdova, who had been walking alone for 2 1/2 days in his second attempt at illegal entry into the country, stayed with the boy through the night, building a fire, getting him food and giving him a sweater. In the morning, he found a pair of hunters who called authorities.

Christopher, who had lost his father on Labor Day, was flown to University Medical Center in Tucson, and

Córdova turned himself in to Border Patrol agents and was returned to Mexico that same day.

Had Córdova not been there, nobody knows what would have happened to the boy, Santa Cruz County Sheriff Tony Estrada has said.

At a ceremony Tuesday in Nogales, officials from both sides of the border thanked Córdova and presented him with plaques and certificates.

When Córdova heard the news Friday evening, he expressed his gratitude to Grijalva. A green card would help him very much by giving him the opportunity to work in the United States, he said. He is currently working for city public works in Magdalena de Kino, Sonora, but said work is always more plentiful north of the border.

"I hope there is a chance," he said in Spanish. "Now, I just have to wait and see."

If he does get the visa, one man has already offered him a job. Al Flores, owner of Al's Carpet Clean and Cleaning Services in Nogales, told Córdova on Tuesday he has a job waiting for him if he can obtain a work visa.

"I think he really deserves it," said Flores, "He could have just walked away."

Even though he is a staunch opponent of illegal immigration, former Border Patrol supervisor Dave Stoddard said he has no problem with making an exception as long as Córdova doesn't have a criminal record in Mexico or the United States.

"If this guy, Córdova, is clean, then as an American citizen, I have no objection to him joining American society," said Stoddard, who retired in 1996 after 27 years with the agency and lives in Cochise County. "He has demonstrated some degree of moral character by sticking around and helping that boy."

Grijalva's office has researched Córdova's past and determined that he has never been formally removed, or deported, from the country and has not committed any criminal acts, said Natalie Luna, Grijalva's press secretary. He has been apprehended before by the Border Patrol but was granted voluntary returns.

For more stories on the border, visit azstarnet.com/border

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