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TOP STORY SPOTLIGHT

World traveler's lies land her in jail: 'I promise I'll never set foot in this country again'

Patrick Lakamp

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She has traveled the world, describing herself to her lawyer as "happily free-spirited."

But for almost two months, Youngshin Nam has felt isolated in the Orleans County jail. The South Korean woman, who cannot speak or write in English, has been in federal custody since ill-advisedly trying to cross the Rainbow Bridge into the United States.

She admitted her mistake Thursday before a federal judge, relying on an interpreter to apologize.

But others played a role in her plight, too.

An ex-boyfriend.

Scammers in her native country.

Even a fortune teller.

Federal judges of late are seeing more defendants come before them charged with trying to re-enter the United States after being deported. Many are construction workers from Mexico, Ecuador

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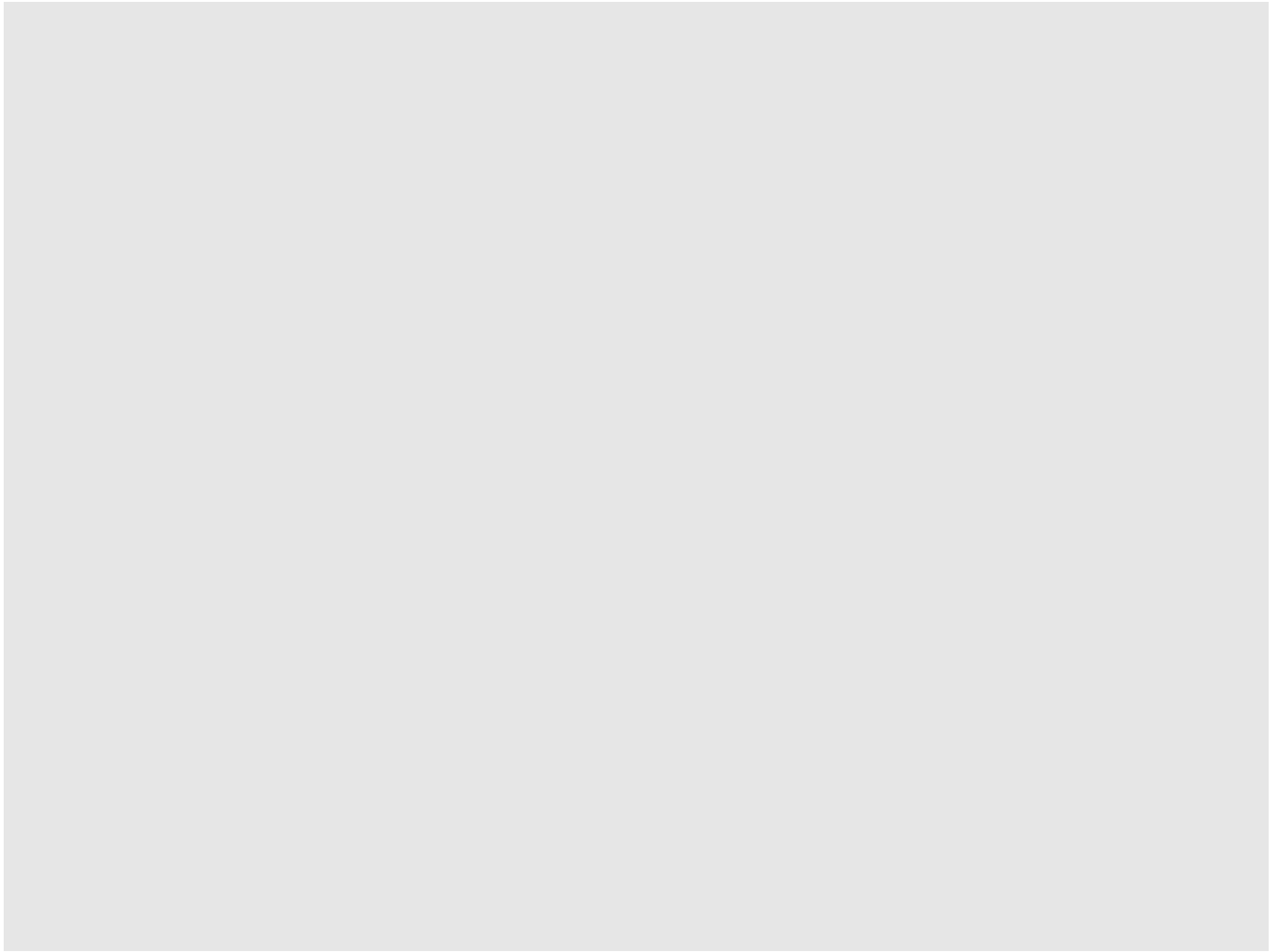
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So, a 41-year-old cosmetologist from South Korea came as something of an exception.

Nonetheless, Nam pleaded guilty to two felony counts, and U.S. District Judge John L. Sinatra Jr. sentenced her to time served, paving the way for her to be deported – again.

Events in her life – from South Korea to New York City, with Las Vegas and the Rio Grande in between – led to her legal peril when she crossed the Rainbow Bridge in a taxi into the U.S. on May 4.



The Rainbow Bridge in Niagara Falls.

Buffalo News file photo

Nam believed she had a lawful right to cross the border, with plans to visit a friend in New York City for the weekend, said attorney Eric Soehnlein, who represented her.

But Customs and Border Protection officers soon realized she did not.

She agreed to submit to electronic fingerprinting during her inspection at the border crossing, and the results revealed her problem.

Nam submitted a falsified application for the Visa Waiver Program, lying when she answered “no” to questions concerning her use of any other names or whether she had previously been refused admission to the United States, Assistant U.S. Attorney Evan K. Glaberson said.



**His due process rights violated, Gambian man asked for time before being deported.
He got 48 hours**

In April 2024, Nam traveled by plane to Las Vegas, but was refused admission to the United States at the airport. She was sent back to South Korea and advised that she was no longer eligible to travel under the Visa Waiver Program for five years, according to the U.S. Attorney's Office. In July 2024, Nam was arrested by U.S. Border Patrol agents in Texas after illegally crossing the Rio Grande and again removed from the United States.

"This is basically the defendant's third strike," Glaberson said in court Thursday.

'Forgive my offense'

Her lawyer said she did not intend to break the law at the Niagara Falls bridge. In her mind, she could simply turn around and return to Canada if customs officers ruled she did not have lawful status to enter the United States, Soehnlein said.

Instead, she was taken into custody.

Foreign students win reprieve after 'a couple of weeks of terror and fear and turmoil'

Nearly two months later, Nam acknowledged to the judge that she tried to previously enter the country illegally and expressed regret for her current predicament.

She faced up to six months in prison under advisory federal sentencing guidelines.

"She understands what she did was wrong," Soehnlein said.

"What she's endured the last two months at the Orleans County jail is an extremely isolated existence," Soehnlein said, noting she had no money to contact family while locked up where none of the inmates, jail deputies or counselors spoke her native language.

Soehnlein urged a sentence of time served, and the judge agreed.

Prosecutor: No nefarious intent seen in ex-Iranian Revolutionary Guard member trying to enter U.S.

"I encourage you to stay out of these messes in the future," the judge said, adding that her actions led to "a lot of time wasted" for government officials who dealt with her case.

"I am so sorry," Nam said through the interpreter. "Please forgive my offense. I promise I'll never set foot in this country again."

Fortuneteller's counsel

In his 10-page sentencing memo to the court, Soehnlein laid out his client's misfortunes and poor choices.

Throughout her 20s, she ran her own successful cosmetic/beauty salon in Seoul. About 10 years ago she sold her business, and she worked as an independent contractor or in cafes or restaurants as she traveled the world, her lawyer said.

Sentenced for fraud, Deborah Bowers laments 'preposterous' case over Iraqi radio station

In December 2023, she lawfully traveled to the United States, where she began a romantic relationship, made several friends and worked at a restaurant in New Jersey. She remained here until March 2024.

The following month, she flew to Las Vegas to visit her vacationing boyfriend. But she was not permitted to re-enter the country, and she returned to South Korea.

Her relationship continued long distance with her boyfriend, who suggested she enter the United States illegally by crossing the southern border, Soehnlein said.

She tried, but the Border Patrol caught her in Texas. Once again, she was deported.

Her relationship with her boyfriend ended, and things got worse for her in South Korea. She was taken advantage of in a financial scam that wiped out much of her personal savings, her lawyer said. The perpetrators who betrayed her were people she thought were her friends, leaving her devastated.

After helping build a radio station for women in a war zone, Steve Jabar still fights the fraud counts that followed

Feeling her luck was at an all-time low, she visited a fortuneteller, who counseled her to change her name to rid herself of her bad luck, Soehnlein wrote in his sentencing memo.

Earlier this year, her friends in New York invited her to visit for a few days to attend a cosmetology trade show and to catch up.

She enlisted the help of a friend who could read and write in English to apply for entry into the United States via the Electronic System for Travel Authorization, required for citizens of participating countries to travel here for tourism or business for stays of 90 days or less without needing a traditional visa.

Nam did not review the application in her language. Thinking she had been approved, she flew to Canada and headed to the Niagara Falls border crossing.

At the Rainbow Bridge, she presented a South Korean passport containing her new name: Yejin Nam.

The electronic fingerprinting scan revealed her previous name and deportations.

Ordeal not over

With her federal court case resolved, Nam will be turned over to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

"Ms. Nam's ordeal is not over," Soehnlein said.

She'll be in ICE custody until she's deported, he added.

"It may come quick. It may come slow," Soehnlein said.

"We all know the experience will be unpleasant," he said.

Patrick Lakamp can be reached at plakamp@buffnews.com



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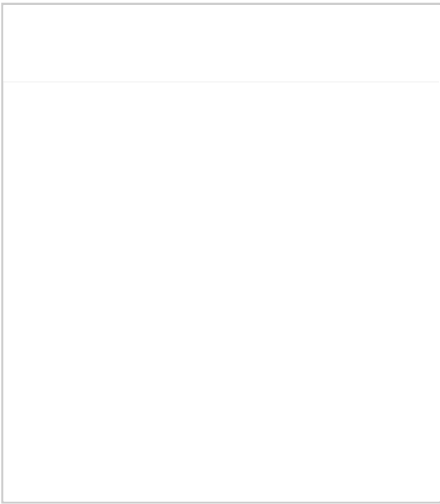
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