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Fertility statues come to Myrtle Beach

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People will go to great lengths to get pregnant - spending tens of thousands of dollars on in vitro fertilization, using sperm and egg donors and finding surrogate mothers.

Maybe all it takes is a couple of wooden statues.

These aren't any ordinary statues. These 5-foot-tall Ivory Coast male and female figures are credited for thousands of pregnancies.

The statues are making the rounds at Ripley's Believe It Or Not Odditoriums, and will come to the Myrtle Beach location on Ocean Boulevard in February.

It sounds slightly hokey, superstitious and may have zero chance of working, but it's quick and free.

They'll be on display for free in the attraction's lobby at 901 N. Ocean Blvd. during regular business hours of 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Sunday to Friday and 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Saturday.

Ripley's legend has it that 13 women became pregnant after the statues landed in the company's Orlando corporate office in 1993. After they surged to popularity throughout the 1990s, they stopped touring in 2001, but have come out of "retirement" this year.

Worker visas run out

There are no more visas available for seasonal workers for the first half of this year, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services office announced last week.

Grand Strand tourism industry businesses, such as restaurants and hotels, have hired workers using these visas, called H-2B visas, in the past for jobs such as waitresses, lifeguards, maids and other service positions.

Critics say the visas are just a way for businesses to hire labor on the cheap while ignoring a local labor pool that might demand more from their employers.

Recently, businesses across the country, primarily in the tourism or skiing industries, have pushed Congress to lift the cap, saying the demand for these workers far exceeds the limit of 66,000 workers per year.

A couple of years ago, a law expired that had allowed workers to return without counting toward the cap. Tourism business representatives have lobbied to get the law changed, but it has stalled and they do not have much hope for the upcoming year.

"Technically the issue is still alive," said Brad Dean, president of the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce. "But given the current priorities in the Congress, such as confirmation hearings, stimulus package and other topics, we don't expect that legislation to move anytime soon."

The U.S. Department of Labor also announced a number of changes to the H-2B program, including a rule that forbids employers from charging employees the cost of getting a visa. Employers who illegally fire U.S. workers can be fined \$10,000, plus back wages, and workers can be reinstated.