

(January 23, 2008) Reprieve for illegal immigrant

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WEST BEVERLY | Deportation put on hold for Frenchwoman

January 23, 2008 BY SHAMUS TOOMEY Staff Reporter

<http://www.suntimes.com/news/metro/754252,CST-NWS-immig23.article>

A glass of champagne, an excited dog named Fifi and ecstatic West Beverly neighbors welcomed home Corina Turcinovic on Tuesday night after the French national's deportation was put on hold and she was sprung from jail.

The 43-year-old, behind bars since Dec. 28 for overstaying her permission to come to the United States, was headed to O'Hare Airport to be deported Tuesday, her lawyer said, but she got a last-minute reprieve.

"I'm going to go out and celebrate," she shouted with a French accent after being hugged so hard by a friend they toppled into the snow. "I don't want to sleep. I want to eat, eat, eat. Because prison food, I don't think the dog would eat it."

'Craziest day of my life'

Her return to her adopted home followed a roller-coaster day that started with a 3:30 a.m. wake-up call at the McHenry County Jail. That was followed by a trip to an immigration holding cell and the start of a car ride to O'Hare that her lawyer, John D. Colbert, thought would have ended with a 6:19 p.m. flight to Paris.

She never made it to the airport, though. After a flurry of phone calls and meetings, Rep. Dan Lipinski (D-Ill.) helped get a congressional subcommittee to take another look at Turcinovic's case. The U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency agreed to put her deportation on hold for now.

Lipinski's office said a bill to grant her legal residency will be considered next month, and Turcinovic could get a one-year stay of deportation while it is pending.

"This is the craziest day of my life," she said. "I'm staying. I'm going. I'm staying. I'm going."

She had a good idea there could be a happy ending when a cell phone rang in the sport utility vehicle taking her to O'Hare about 4:30 p.m. She was in the back seat, and two government agents were up front. "Suddenly they got a phone call, and they turned the radio up," she said. "So I knew something was cooking. They didn't want me to hear."

Soon, the SUV turned around, and she was returned to a holding cell in west suburban Broadview. Then she was told she was being released.

Her friends, neighbors and labradoodle were waiting in West Beverly.

"I'm going to take everyone out to dinner at the best steakhouse," she declared.

Turcinovic came to the United States in 1990 after her fiance, Maro, was hit by a car while visiting. A hospital mistake left him a quadriplegic. Turcinovic, who was only allowed to be here for 90 days, married him and cared for him for 14 years. Immigration officials agreed not to deport her during that time.

Maro nearly became a U.S. citizen, but his application stalled when officials insisted he come in to be fingerprinted, which he couldn't do, Lipinski's office said. In 2004, while waiting for an agent to come to his bedside to take his prints, Maro died.

His naturalization was her best chance to stay here legally. Three years later, she was arrested and scheduled to be deported.

"This was not about immigration reform," Lipinski said Tuesday evening. "This was a government mistake."

Lipinski's office credited Rep. Zoe Lofgren (D-Calif.) with helping by talking to top Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers. Republican Representatives Steve King of Iowa and Lamar Smith of Texas also agreed the case needed a second look, Lipinski's office said.

"Tell Congressman Lipinski I adore him forever," Turcinovic said with a smile.