

## (January 22, 2008) Illegal immigrant widow avoids deportation - for now

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CHICAGO

As a distressed Corina Turcinovic sat in a white federal van bound for a Chicago airport, it seemed her worst fear was about to become reality and she would be deported from the country she sees as home.

Instead, the van suddenly turned around, making Tuesday one of the happiest days of Turcinovic's life.

The immigrant who stayed in the U.S. after caring for her late, paralyzed husband narrowly averted being deported after sympathetic friends, lawyers and congressmen frantically scrambled on her behalf.

Not only was the 43-year-old not forced to board a plane headed to her native France, but immigration officials set her free instead of returning her to the jail where she'd been held for more than three weeks.

"I'm in heaven," a giddy and laughing Turcinovic told The Associated Press by cell phone less than 30 minutes after her release. "It's been really insane. I can't believe I'm sitting here. I'm going to go and kiss my dog."

Turcinovic said she intended to go out later Tuesday and "take everyone who help me out for a steak dinner, on me."

Her attorney sought lawmakers' intervention throughout Tuesday as the clock ticked toward a 6:19 p.m. flight time. The successful appeal was almost unheard of, said attorney John Colbert.

"This is very rare, really unique," Colbert said. "It was so touch and go all day."

Turcinovic, of Bordeaux, said she regarded the U.S. as her home after taking care of her quadriplegic husband at their South Side home for more than a decade until he died in 2004.

"It's a fun country, except when you get sent to jail," she laughed. "I have a lovely life here, and great friends."

Turcinovic overstayed her visa while caring for her husband, Maro Turcinovic, who was crossing a street on a visit to the U.S in 1990 when a drunk driver hit him. The Croatian native died before his own green card paperwork went through.

Colbert said he didn't know why authorities moved up Turcinovic's scheduled deportation from Jan. 30, waking her in her McHenry County jail cell before dawn Tuesday, placing handcuffs and leg shackles on her, then transferring her to a Chicago detention center.

"I'm not sure they're being mean-spirited, and I don't think they are, I just think they don't want any more heat here and just want to get rid of it," he said.

Rep. Dan Lipinski, who introduced a bill last week that could eventually grant Turcinovic resident status, said he spent much of Tuesday getting members of the U.S. House Judiciary Committee to contact immigration authorities.

"It could not have been any more dramatic," the Democrat said. "But I'm very happy with the result."

Lipinski hoped members of the Judiciary Committee would vote soon to request a report from immigration authorities on Turcinovic's case, legislative action he said would allow her to stay in the U.S. until at least the middle of next year.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement stopped Turcinovic's deportation "to give Congress additional time to decide whether or not they will consider the proposed bill granting her legal status," said spokeswoman Gail Montenegro.

Authorities showed "a great deal of compassion" by extending Turcinovic's visa for years to enable her to care for her husband, Montenegro said.

"But the fact remains that Ms. Turcinovic has been residing in the U.S. without authorization since August of 2004," she said. "And we're required to enforce the nation's laws without regard to an individual's ability to generate media attention."

Turcinovic immigrated to the U.S. on a visa waiver after her then-fiance's accident. The couple moved to Chicago and married, living off savings and settlement money from a malpractice lawsuit.

Corina Turcinovic lived legally in the U.S. for 14 years by applying for stays of deportation on the humanitarian grounds she was her husband's caretaker.

Maro Turcinovic had applied for U.S. citizenship but a "bureaucratic mistake" led to the denial of his application and if it wasn't for the error, Corina Turcinovic could have stayed legally as the wife or widow of a U.S. citizen, Colbert said.

As part of his citizenship application, Maro Turcinovic was required to give fingerprints, but since he was housebound he could not go in person. Immigration officials denied his application when Turcinovic didn't show up for a status hearing, Colbert said.

Lipinski said that convinced him and other lawmakers -- both Democrat and Republican -- to side with Turcinovic.

Immigration officials arrested Turcinovic at her home late last month.