


Beloved French teacher on brink of deportation gets to stay after 'out of the blue' reprieve | Education

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On Thursday, French teacher Djibril Coulibaly, 50, walked quietly out of the Pine Prairie Correctional Center and into an SUV driven by his cousin, Bissy Coumare.

Coulibaly grasped his cousin and other friends in joy and relief after he was buzzed through a security gate to freedom. Though Coulibaly had no comment about his experience, Coumare said that, in his younger cousin's face, he saw a man who was happy to be released but still overwhelmed by sadness because of the turmoil he had been through. "Though he had no words, his facial expressions are speaking for him," said Coumare, who also teaches French with Coulibaly in Thibodaux.



Djibril Coulibaly poses with his wife, Maimouna. (Photo from Coulibaly family)
Provided photo

When Coulibaly was able to speak a few hours later, it became clear that the look of sorrow his cousin witnessed was partly health-related: on the way home, he tested positive for COVID-19, a result that didn't surprise him, because four out of 43 men in his dorm had tested positive during his three-week stay there. He'd lost eight pounds during his detention and so, though his COVID symptoms were mild, he did not feel well.

"I'm getting weaker and weaker," he said. "And I've lost my appetite."

He also was extremely disappointed that he would not be able to hug his wife or his three children when he arrived home in Thibodaux. Instead, he had been on the phone with his wife, to set aside one of their home's bedrooms as a quarantine-only area where he would spend the next few weeks alone. Though he had been longing to return to work, that was also impossible.

Among the small group of people waiting outside the immigration-detention facility was Boubacar Maiga, 62, a French teacher and Malian immigrant in St. Landry Parish who has faced similar visa struggles after an administrative paperwork error by his employer.

U.S. Immigrant and Customs Enforcement officials had no explanation for the change in circumstances for Coulibaly. Last week, the soft-spoken elementary-school teacher who has taught in Louisiana for 19 years was told by a Pine Prairie officer that he was facing immediate deportation to his native Mali, in West Africa.

And on Monday, his attorney, Loyola University Law Professor Hiroko Kusuda, believed deportation was imminent when she'd received an email telling her that an ICE administrator had refused Coulibaly's petition for a stay of deportation. Then, on Wednesday afternoon, "out of the blue," Kusuda said, she got a call telling her that her client would be released Thursday under "an order of supervision," the immigration equivalent of probation that came with an ankle monitor visible to those who witnessed Coulibaly's release.



[Watch on YouTube](#)

Coulibaly's family credits a groundswell of public support, from educators, neighbors, former Peace Corps members, all of whom wrote letters and made phone calls on behalf of the soft-spoken teacher, after eight squad cars and a swarm of armed ICE officers apprehended Coulibaly as he'd paused his 2001 Toyota minivan at a stop sign outside W.S. Lafargue school, where he works, about three weeks ago.

As of Thursday afternoon, a GoFundMe created to support the family had raised over \$17,800 and a [Change.org](#) petition challenging Coulibaly's planned deportation had over 3,000 signatures.

But those rough indicators don't show the level of interest in Coulibaly's case: from neighbors in Thibodaux, who brought food, giftcards, hugs and prayers to his wife and three children; from French-cultural officials who helped to bring Coulibaly to Louisiana to teach nearly 20 years ago; and from hundreds of former Peace Corps volunteers who had been trained and taught French and other languages by Coulibaly.

Nicholls State University professor Robin White, a former Peace Corps volunteer, wrote letters pleading for Coulibaly's release to ICE officials and U.S. Rep. Cedric Richmond, D-New Orleans, who recently resigned to move to the administration of President-elect Joe Biden. White also spread word of Coulibaly's detention to fellow professors, colleagues nationwide and returned Peace Corps volunteers.

White, who served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Mali three decades ago, met Coulibaly at Cercle Francophone, a French table in Thibodaux, and described him as a friendly, humble and open man who had a quiet demeanor and a kind spirit. Basically, Coulibaly carried the spirit of Mali, said White, remembering how she adapted to the culture with the help of generous locals — “the kindest, most hospitable people who had nothing.”

Those experiences left a lasting impression on her heart and motivated her to advocate for Coulibaly. “His case — I just thought it was impossible this is happening and I felt passionate about it, given the experiences I had had in Mali,” White said.

Louisiana’s Francophone community rallied around Coulibaly because he and other teachers like him “become treasured members of their communities,” said Matt Mick, spokesman for CODOFIL, the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana.

The bond between teachers and community is especially strong in Acadiana, where grandparents who speak Cajun French visit the classrooms of French teachers like Coulibaly, happy to know that their descendants are learning their cultural heritage and language. “People see us as carrying out a mission. We arrive here as missionaries of the French language,” said Coulibaly’s co-worker Bani Ningbinnin, who was recruited from Benin to teach French in Louisiana schools.

According to Coulibaly’s legal filings, Coulibaly had taught French in Acadiana schools under a legal work permit for 19 years. But in 2010, the St. Landry Parish School Board missed a deadline to renew Coulibaly’s visa. Given the amount of time that Coulibaly’s case has spent in immigration court, it’s unclear what prompted the ICE task force to drive to Thibodaux last month to apprehend Coulibaly.



Djibril Coulibaly and his wife, Maïmouna, pose with their three sons. (Photo from Coulibaly family)
Provided photo

Mick said he's heard of teachers having visa troubles after phasing out of CODOFIL's oversight, but he had not heard of any other teacher being forcibly arrested and threatened with deportation.

In Coulibaly's case, though the error was recognized quickly, immigration officials view small errors like that as incurable mistakes, said Michele McKenzie, deputy director for The Advocates for Human Rights, a Minneapolis-based organization that works to represent asylum seekers and people in detention across the nation.

"A normal way to react would be, 'Why don't you fix the paperwork and let's reinstate.' Instead, it's basically, 'You can't correct that, it's over,'" said McKenzie, noting that the current set of immigration laws "were designed more than 50 years ago, to exclude and expel."

In 2011, the year after the mistake, then-Sen. Mary Landrieu sponsored a bill on Coulibaly's behalf, which would have basically used an act of Congress to reinstate his lawful immigration status. Legislation like this, known as "private bills," were very common a half century ago. "That was how things got done," McKenzie said. Eventually, she said,

Congress tired of the private bills and created new ways to stave off deportations — without really changing the inflexible immigration law that was at the root of the Congressional requests, McKenzie said.

As a result, McKenzie said, there is no cut-and-dried way to resolve cases like Coulibaly's, except to use political back-channels and public outcry to plead for immigration officials to use the prosecutorial discretion in a specific case. It seems that is what happened Wednesday.



Thibodaux French teacher Djibril Coulibaly, 50, center, walks with friends and family after his release from the ICE custody at the Pine Prairie Correctional Center on Thursday, January 7, 2021 in Pine Prairie, LA.

STAFF PHOTO BY BRAD KEMP

“We are so grateful for everyone who spoke up for him. It’s more than exciting,” said Coumare, 65, who teaches French with his younger cousin at W.S. Lafargue Elementary School in Thibodaux and also taught with Coulibaly for years in their native Mali, where the

two of them led trainings of U.S. Peace Corps volunteers together.

Shauna Sias, a community advocate present for Coulibaly's release, said advocates arranged for the 50-year-old to receive a medical evaluation and rapid COVID-19 test upon release to ensure his health. Sias stressed while Thursday was joyous, there's a long road ahead for Coulibaly and his security in the country.

It is unclear if timing ultimately made a difference in Coulibaly's case: President-elect Joe Biden, who takes office in two weeks, has pledged a moratorium on deportations in the first 100 days of his administration.

But advocates say that Biden's pledge to "hit pause" on deportations does not seem to change how ICE agents are acting in the waning days of the Trump administration. Though ICE apprehensions dipped last year because of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an uptick in ICE apprehensions in recent months, said Michele McKenzie, deputy director for The Advocates for Human Rights, a Minneapolis-based organization that works to represent asylum seekers and people in detention across the nation.

"In this case, you had eight cars going up to Thibodaux to get one person who is a visa overstay. This is consistent with what is happening across the country," McKenzie said.

Maiga, the French teacher and Malian immigrant from St. Landry Parish, said his experiences were remarkably similar to that of Coulibaly. In 2001, just one day apart, the two men immigrated from Mali, worked in St. Landry Parish together and have experienced the same visa processes and struggles. Their families remain tight-knit and see each other often, even after the Coulibaly family moved to Lafourche Parish.

Still, fear about his personal circumstances was not enough to keep Maiga away on such an important day.

"I wanted to show him my support and tell him he's not alone. I want to show him I know what he's going through," the French teacher said.

Pine Prairie and other ICE facilities in Louisiana have long been deportation-staging areas for immigrants apprehended from across the United States. Last year, nearly 90 percent of detainees who left Pine Prairie left on ICE's fleet of deportation airplanes, which take immigrants home to the places of their birth, in Central and South America and Africa.

And yet, somehow this week, something moved in Coulibaly's favor within ICE, possibly because of the outpouring of community support.

“People called and wrote letters because they could see the value of an individual human being, something that our immigration policy has failed to do for generations,” said McKenzie, of The Advocates for Human Rights.

Maiga said that, despite the happy life he lives in Louisiana, his close friend’s disappearance was an unwelcome reminder of the potential danger and upheaval he also faces.

“Any time there is a knock on the door you don’t know if it’s ICE coming. It’s very emotional,” Maiga said.