

# Senegalese Teenager in Deportation Fight Wins Right to Study in America

By NINA BERNSTEIN

**I**t was the unexpected success of his East Harlem high school robotics team in April that forced Amadou Ly, 18, to reveal his secret: He was an illegal immigrant from Senegal, left at 14 to fend for himself in hopes of completing an American education, but caught instead in what seemed like a losing battle against deportation.

But when the secret became front-page news in *The New York Times*, scores of strangers rallied to his side. To pressure the Department of Homeland Security on his behalf, volunteer lawyers built a team that included 6 senators, 23 members of the House of Representatives, Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg and the Senegalese ambassador. Word spread that even the man in the Oval Office had weighed in.

And yesterday, Amadou carried home the prize: a student visa that will allow him to stay in the United States legally and go to college.

"It's like a dream has come true," he said, already picking out the English and math courses he will take at the New York City College of Technology in the fall. "Every day in this country is like a gift. To tell you the truth, all the people who really helped me, I won't be able to thank them all — but I'll do my best to make them proud."

In the end, Amadou's story won over everyone, said Ilona Cohen, a lawyer with the well-connected law firm WilmerHale, which orchestrated intensive lobbying in Washington while in New York lawyers at Latham & Watkins and the Legal Aid Society brainstormed on strategy. Officials at Immigration and Customs Enforcement, part of Homeland Security, agreed to drop the deportation proceedings, opening the way for Citizenship and Immigration Services to grant the student visa.

"Public officials really put pressure on ICE because they had the foresight to understand that the country really needs people like Amadou," Ms. Cohen said.

Yet so many agencies, complex rules and expiring deadlines were involved that until yesterday the outcome still seemed uncertain, said Amy Meselson, the Legal Aid Society lawyer who had added Amadou to a caseload of hundreds of unaccompanied minors facing deportation when he showed up in immigration court alone in April.

Last week, everything seemed to hinge on renewing Amadou's passport from Senegal, which had been confiscated by federal officials in 2004 and meanwhile had expired.



Patrick Andrade for The New York Times

*"Every day in this country is like a gift," said Amadou Ly, shown yesterday in Harlem. He has been on his own since he was 14.*

Government lawyers were willing to lend it briefly to Ms. Meselson, and she described a frantic cab ride with Amadou to the Senegalese Consulate last Friday, minutes before it closed. Senegalese officials made a special exception in extending it.

Another last-minute wrinkle arose when the college official expected to sign the necessary foreign student forms turned out to be "incommunicado in a cabin in Maine," she said. A substitute was eventually found to do the job.

Part of the urgency, Ms. Meselson said, was that officially, Amadou was only days away from accumulating 180 days of illegal presence in the United States, a milestone that could have barred him from returning for three years if forced to leave.

"It's totally amazing," she said, reflecting on how things turned out.

Amadou's mother brought him from Dakar on a visitor's visa when he was 13 and left him here after the visa expired. He did odd jobs to buy food and school supplies, and took shelter with a family friend who could sign his report card when he enrolled at Central Park East High School. Deportation proceedings against

him began in November 2004 after a state trooper in Pennsylvania reported him to immigration authorities. Amadou had come to the trooper's attention as a passenger in a car accident.

But last year when Amadou's underdog robotics team beat those from the city's elite schools and was invited to compete nationally in Atlanta, he revealed that he had no government-issued identification to board a plane. While his teammates flew to Atlanta, he set off on an 18-hour train journey to join them. By the time he arrived, response to the article had drawn wide news media coverage, as well as a shower of money for college tuition.

At the time, the lawyers thought his best chance was passage of a measure known as the Dream Act, which offers a path to citizenship to some young people. But the measure is languishing in Congress in an impasse of competing immigration legislation.

On the one hand, Ms. Cohen said, Amadou's story is "a triumph of good government." On the other, she added, "it's about the nature of a system that only provides relief for one kid — with well-connected attorneys — at a time."