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# **Teacher lives in fear of deportation**

**By Susan Carroll -**

HOUSTON — On a Thursday morning in early November, Houston middle school teacher Marie Baptiste was driving to work when a squadron of unmarked government vehicles stopped her at a red light. Her chest tightened.

A little more than three years had passed since she last was picked up by Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents. She spent six months bouncing among immigration detention centers in Texas and Louisiana, fighting deportation to Haiti and worrying about being separated from her U.S.-citizen husband and children.

With her case on appeal, she and her husband, a Fort Bend County constable, had carefully built a life that resembled that of so many other middle-class Houston families.

Their days were filled with full-time jobs, helping their eldest daughter with homework assignments and changing their baby's diapers.

But beneath that veneer of normalcy, the couple worried about how to shield their children from their own nagging fears about Baptiste's possible deportation, stemming from a missed immigration court hearing years ago.

### **Temporary reprieve**

On the morning of Nov. 6, Baptiste never made it to work, or to an immigration detention center. The 30-year-old slumped to the ground alongside her car and was taken via ambulance to a west Houston hospital for symptoms related to an anxiety attack.

After her release from the hospital, there were no waiting ICE agents.

It was a temporary reprieve, but the fear of being deported and separated from her family now looms heavier than before, she said.

“All I ever wanted is to have a peaceful life for my family,” Baptiste said. “I want to fulfill what I love to do and help people.

“I don't know why I'm being targeted,” she said.

ICE spokesman Gregory Palmore said Baptiste was ordered removed by a judge, and ICE has a responsibility to carry out a judge's final order. He declined to comment further on the specifics of Baptiste's case, which is pending review by the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

Baptiste was 9 when she came to the U.S. from Haiti. She remembers few details of her trip, only that she was on an airplane and spent time in Miami before coming to Houston to live with an aunt.

She said her father was killed in Haiti, and she never knew for certain what became of her mother.

### **Marriage, children**

It wasn't until Baptiste was getting ready to graduate from Willow Ridge High School and applying for scholarships that she became aware of her immigration status, she said.

With no proof of citizenship or legal resident status, she was denied the scholarships, she said, but still went on to earn a degree from the University of Houston in biology and then a teaching certificate.

She and her husband, Rony Baptiste, a U.S. citizen, married in 1998 and started a family.

“She made something out of herself. She's a productive citizen here in Houston. She's not doing anything illegal,” said J. Sadraque Cius, a longtime family friend of Baptiste's and leader in the local Haitian community. “She's shaping young minds. This is who we need in the classroom.”

Baptiste filed for legal status in 2000, and the application appeared to be progressing smoothly until her daughter Natasha came down with a fever and started vomiting the night before an immigration court hearing.

After waiting to see the doctor and hitting traffic near the court, she said, she arrived between five and 10 minutes late.

In the meantime, the immigration judge had ordered her removed in absentia. Over the next few years, Baptiste changed attorneys and appealed the removal order. After initially denying a motion to reopen the case, Immigration Judge Phillip Law granted her a green card in 2007, said Gordon Quan, her immigration attorney.

But attorneys for ICE appealed the decision, questioning whether the judge had legal discretion to rule on a previously denied motion, Quan said. Since then, the case has been working its way through the appeals process. Quan said Baptiste has no family left in Haiti and has built a life in Houston with her family and students.

“She's doing all the right things,” Quan said. “She's active in the community. She's what we want from people here.”

Baptiste said she is trying to protect her children from realizing what is happening with her case, but behind closed doors, Baptiste and her husband are anxious that one day she won't come home from work.

“She's a teacher. I'm a police officer. We don't do anything wrong,” Rony Baptiste said. “Why all this persecution? I just don't understand it.”