

Augsburg University rallies around professor facing deportation

The Lutheran school and local officials have called for Mzenega Wanyama and his family to stay.

by [Celeste Kennel-Shank](#) in the [August 29, 2018](#) issue



Mzenega Wanyama (left), a professor at Augsburg University in Minneapolis, speaks to media and supporters on April 5 after a check in with Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Photo courtesy of Gita Sitaramiah / Augsburg University.

Uncertainty is the word for a Kenyan American couple in Minneapolis facing the possibility of being forced to leave the U.S.

After more than 25 years here, Mzenega Wanyama, a tenured professor of English at Augsburg University, and Mary Mzenega, a nursing student at the school, which is affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, were told by Immigration and Customs Enforcement in March that they would need to return to Kenya for at least two years before applying for permanent residence or another visa.

Their situation has sparked protests by Augsburg students at ICE offices and drawn the support of the faculty, the university president, and local politicians, including the mayor of Minneapolis and the governor of Minnesota.

ICE has extended the date by which they must depart the United States several times. Now, it's in September, Wanyama said. However, they still have hope that motions for relief they have filed will result in their removal being halted.

"That hope might be realistic," Wanyama said.

The couple came to the U.S. with a J-visa to pursue Wanyama's graduate studies. Their two older sons have Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals status. Their youngest son was born in Minneapolis and is now a sophomore at the University of Minnesota.

"This has been really traumatizing to him," Wanyama said. "It has adversely affected his performance in school."

With their attorneys, they have filed a motion with the Board of Immigration Appeals to reopen their asylum case based on changed country conditions and have requested review of the J-visa waiver denial by the State Department. Kenya has had several bouts of election-related violence as recently as last fall, and security forces have committed serious human rights abuses, according to the leading nongovernmental organizations. Last year Wanyama's mother was murdered in his hometown.

"We have been consistently responsive to all the demands of our particular immigration status and allowed the government to easily maintain strict tabs on us," [the couple said in a statement](#). They have broken no laws of any kind and have been authorized to work, having "each held gainful employment for all the time we have lived in this country."

Wanyama has been on the Augsburg faculty since 2006, and Mary Mzenga has pursued nursing degrees while also working as a nurse.

Augsburg's faculty senate offered unanimous support and emphasized the school's "status as an institution that supports the many immigrant and refugee members of our academic community."

Robert Cowgill, chair of the English Department, has asked ICE to delay its deportation order until after the fall term so that Wanyama can teach his classes; ICE has declined to delay it. Together Cowgill and Wanyama have decided Wanyama will begin the term as usual this fall. His courses are full.

Wanyama has expertise in postcolonial and African American literature that no one else on campus has, Cowgill said. “He’s able to effectively articulate the intersection of identity and culture and systems of power.”

While team-teaching recently, Cowgill was able to see “a quality of authenticity” in Wanyama that causes students to connect with him. That connection led students to jump to Wanyama’s defense when they learned about his legal situation.

“I’ve never seen an event galvanize a campus so quickly,” Cowgill said. “Now whether ICE cares, that’s another question. They are a bureaucracy, a power that sometimes seems unaccountable to anyone but themselves.”

Cowgill knows churches that would likely be willing to provide sanctuary for the couple, as congregations across the country are doing for those facing deportation orders. But living in sanctuary would mean not being able to leave the church buildings, which can feel like a kind of prison, Cowgill said.

Cowgill noted that students have told him about their parents being deported and about being left behind in the U.S. with other relatives. He has observed a sense of solidarity on campus with Wanyama and others facing uncertainty because of immigration status.

“One thing that’s clear, to cite Hannah Arendt, is that we can talk all we want about the rights of humanity, but those rights don’t mean anything unless there is citizenship attached to them,” Cowgill said.

Mzenga Wanyama and Mary Mzenga’s situation has not only brought people at Augsburg together as a community, it has also spurred reflection about the pros and cons of protest.

Throughout the spring term students and others demonstrated outside ICE headquarters in the Twin Cities. Conversations about the demonstrations caused Gabriel Benson, a senior English major who was one of the organizers, to consider the possibility that ICE might want to make an example of Wanyama.

“That really opened my eyes to how much power these people really had, and how much they didn’t need to care about public opinion,” Benson said.

Nevertheless, he still finds value in the community coming together to stand up for its beliefs. [A petition he started](#) now has more than 17,000 signatures. Another

supporter started [a crowdsourcing campaign for legal costs](#) and has raised more than \$7,700.

“Our voices do have power, our voices matter, even if we’re not seeing the result we want,” he said.

For his part, Wanyama sees a benefit to the campus as a whole in his family’s situation becoming public, building understanding of the struggle they and others face. “They never thought a professor of theirs would be in this kind of quagmire,” he said.

Students are able to speak more clearly about family separation and other issues.

“Immigration is a really human situation that requires serious attention from people in all social spheres, including Christian ones,” he said. “People who never normally pay attention are now paying attention, including ones who support the current immigration policy. Our situation has contributed in some small way to that debate, and I hope that it’s a positive contribution.” —*Christian Century*

FOLLOWING UP (Updated September 26): Mzenga Wanyama and Mary Mzenga were granted reprieve from deportation, at least temporarily. The Board of Immigration Appeals is deciding whether or not to reopen their asylum case. The couple have lived in the United States for decades and have three sons, one of whom is a U.S. citizen. Wanyama has begun teaching fall semester classes.

“We are saddened that Dr. Wanyama continues to face this difficult situation,” said Paul Pribbenow, Augsburg president, in a statement. “We value his scholarship and skill set and are exploring options for him to continue working in Augsburg’s global operations if he can’t stay in the U.S.”

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Augsburg professor faces deportation.”