

Now 18, Rifqa Bary Gains Long-Awaited Freedom

Rifqa Bary, the teen convert at the center of a high-profile religious and family dispute, turned 18 Tuesday and was released from Ohio state custody, ending a yearlong legal battle with her parents.

It was not announced where Bary would be living, but her attorney, Kort Gatterdam, said she plans to “continue to preach the gospel to anyone who wants to hear it, as she heard it five years ago.”

This time last year, Bary was living in Orlando, Fla., where she fled from her home near Columbus, Ohio, claiming her parents threatened to kill her for leaving Islam for Christianity. Her parents, Mohamed and Aysha Bary, have denied those allegations, and an investigation found no evidence to support her accusations.

In October, she was returned to Columbus and had since been living in foster care there.

On Thursday, Franklin County Juvenile Court Magistrate Mary Goodrich ruled that Bary would not be reunited with her family before her 18th birthday, allowing her to file for a special immigrant juvenile status for underage illegal immigrants.

Goodrich also said it was not in the teen’s best interest to return to her native Sri Lanka, where Bary’s supporters say she could be harmed because of her conversion.

The teen’s family, including her two brothers, are working with attorneys to secure their own legal immigration status.

If immigration officials approve the special status, Bary would be entitled to some public benefits and would be able to

obtain a Social Security card and a driver's license. Five years after receiving a green card she could apply for citizenship, the *Columbus Dispatch* reported.

Whether Bary will remain in Ohio or move elsewhere is unclear, said the teen's friend, Jamal Jivanjee. He said she has developed strong friendships with Christians across the country. "There's a lot of people who are willing to take her in and provide for her," he said.

Blake Lorenz, the Orlando pastor who took Bary in when she fled to Florida, said a trust has been set up for her. He has been in contact with the teen since she returned to Ohio, though he and his wife were the focus of a criminal investigation for their involvement in helping her leave Ohio.

Partly because of his role in helping a minor cross state lines, Lorenz was ousted from his church and has since started a new one. But the charismatic pastor says if he had it to do over again, he would still help the teen.

"We would definitely take her in and protect her life," he said. "Everything was well worth it, protecting her life and seeing her through this, even though we lost a lot."

Bary has been battling uterine cancer and underwent a successful surgery in May. She began chemotherapy but stopped before the round of treatment was complete.

Her parents alleged their daughter ceased the treatment because she wrongly believed she had been miraculously healed after attending a prayer service in Ohio featuring Mozambique-based minister Heidi Baker. But Gatterdam said that claim is "offensive."

He said Bary's doctors declared her cancer-free but encouraged her to undergo chemotherapy to prevent a recurrence. She discontinued the treatment in consultation with her physicians because it made her too weak to focus on upcoming hearings, he

added. He said doctors are continuing to evaluate her and hope she will resume the treatment when she grows stronger.

Craig McCarthy, a Christian attorney who represented Aysha Bary when the case was in Florida, said he never saw evidence that the teen would be in danger with her parents and laments the outcome of the legal battle.

"I think it's a tragedy that a young woman converted to my faith and ended up never reconciling with her parents and remaining estranged even with her brothers," McCarthy said. "I think a bunch of people rushed to make this case into their own image, to make it what they wanted it to be an argument about a religion or whatever their agenda was."

In a statement read Tuesday when Bary was released from state custody, Bary's parents told their daughter: "No matter what has happened, you will always be our daughter, we love you, and the door will always be open if you want to have a relationship with us," according to the *Columbus Dispatch*.

They blamed her attorneys for the family's inability to reconcile. "The sad reality is that when our daughter's usefulness has been used for the political agenda of xenophobia and religious bigotry, when they have moved on to other ways of putting Islam and immigrants on trial, then they will not care about Rifqa Bary anymore," the statement said.

Gatterdam said his client loves and forgives her parents but still doesn't feel safe with them. He said reunification would not be possible until her parents admit to past abuse, which he believes caused Bary to seek love and acceptance in Christ.

"The parents, whether it's religious reasons or whatever, they just cannot accept her conversion," he said. "And to her it was a life or death situation, so she had to leave, and we've seen no evidence that anything has changed in them."

Jivanjee, a convert from Islam himself who leads a Florida-

based ministry called Illuminate, said Bary's case got the attention of young Muslims, who he said were moved by her courage and are now curious about Christianity.

"Now that she's 18 and she's able to communicate as she chooses, I think that's only going to increase," he said, "because she's a walking testimony to the fact that Muslims, especially Muslim women, can escape abuse and be free of this system and live to tell about it."