News

Matthew Morrison, with Francie Broderick and their children, at a 24-hour vigil in downtown St. Louis in 1996 (The Marshall Project/Courtesy of Morrison family)

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Trump administration officials aim to pressure some noncitizens into self-deporting. It worked on Matthew Morrison. In mid-July, the 69-year-old former psychiatric nurse supervisor quietly fled the United States.

Morrison had been threatened by an aggressive government before. When he was a teenager, he fought against what he and others in the Irish Republican Army saw as an occupying British government that discriminated against marginalized Catholics in Northern Ireland.

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For his efforts then, Morrison said he was beaten by interrogators and wound up in prison, where some of his comrades died in a hunger strike protesting the revocation of their political status.

Upon his release in 1985, he feared for his safety. He came to St. Louis, married his American pen pal and had two children. Eventually, he overstayed his tourist visa, divorced his pen pal and remarried. He's had the spectre of deportation hanging over him for decades. His family has endured the highs and lows of his battle along the way.

Matt Morrison holds a framed picture of his father, Matthew, in St. Louis on July 22, 2025. Matthew Morrison, an Irish immigrant who resided in the U.S. for 40 years, self-deported to Ireland on July 21, 2025. (The Marshall Project/Katie Moore)

Now, Morrison leans on a cane. He's had several strokes. He said that the fear and uncertainty that he might be picked up by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement was more than he could bear.

"I would bite the dust in an ICE holding cell," Morrison told The Marshall Project - St. Louis before he left the U.S. "There is nothing to stop them from deporting me to Ecuador, South Sudan or whatever. It's really gotten insane here. It's crazy what they are doing now, the Trump administration. You know what I mean?"

Many noncitizens have faced similar unknowns in hiding. Morrison has been in the public eye for a long time. He's been in and out of the news since the 1990s. He was even the grand marshal of a parade. But the U.S. government denied his petition for an adjustment in immigration status because of crimes he was convicted of during "The Troubles" conflict in Northern Ireland. Morrison had omitted those from his

original tourist visa application.

Matthew Morrison, with his wife Sandra Riley Swift, in 2025 (The Marshall Project/Courtesy of Morrison family)

In 2000, the Clinton administration terminated the deportation process against Morrison and five other named "deportees," as the group of former Irish Republican Army prisoners was called, after the American spouses of the Irish men testified before Congress. The president himself weighed in on the issue.

"While in no way approving or condoning their past criminal acts," Bill Clinton said then, according to a Washington Post story at the time, "I believe that removing the threat of deportation for these individuals will contribute to the peace process in Northern Ireland."

The deportees were momentarily relieved. But because they weren't on a path to citizenship, the six men still had to live with restrictions and regularly check in with the government.

In May, Noel Gaynor, who had a heart condition, died at home in Olean, New York. Waiting months without annual work authorization approval, his Medicare and Social Security benefits were cut off, according to a video of statements made at his wake. In June, Gabriel Megahey received a letter from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security that The Marshall Project - St. Louis reviewed. It began: "It's time for you to leave the United States."

Morrison expected a similar letter. Though his work authorization expires in October, he didn't want to sit around waiting and worrying.

On July 21, he limped onto a one-way flight from Cleveland to Dublin, Ireland, with his wife, leaving behind a life that he'd built in the St. Louis area, including grown children, grandchildren and many friends.

"I've come full circle," Morrison said while still in the United States. "I came here as an immigrant and I am leaving as an immigrant, despite everything in between. The whole thing is a crazy, stressful situation."

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There's a city in Northern Ireland with two names. Protestants call it Londonderry. Catholics, like Morrison, call it Derry.

Matthew Morrison, third from the right, poses for a photograph with fellow Irish Republican Army soldiers inside a Northern Ireland prison in 1976. (The Marshall Project/Courtesy of the Morrison family)

Catholics felt discriminated against there. Without better options, Morrison said his childhood home didn't have an indoor bathroom or hot water. He said the cramped home was raided by British soldiers stationed there to keep the peace between Protestants and Catholics and to ensure Northern Ireland remained part of the United Kingdom.

To resist, he helped build barricades around his neighborhood. On Jan. 30, 1972, 16-year-old Morrison and his father joined thousands of others in the streets of their city. The march for Catholic civil rights became known as Bloody Sunday after British troops fatally shot 14 unarmed people and injured others.

To fight back, Morrison said he joined the Irish Republican Army.

"There was no way to be indifferent," he said.

Three years later, while in college, he said he was arrested with two others for trying to gun down a Royal Ulster Constabulary officer. Again, there were two ways to look at it. To Morrison, it was an act of war. Others saw it as terrorism.

Later, he'd claim he was choked and beaten during police interrogations, which left him deaf in one ear. Convicted of attempted murder, he was sent to a prison outside Belfast that became widely known for a hunger strike where 10 people died.

Matthew Morrison's children, Matt, 37, and Katie, 34, on July 22, 2025, the day after he self-deported (The Marshall Project/Katie Moore)

Released in 1985, Morrison fled to St. Louis, where he soon married Francie Broderick, an American pen pal who'd protested in Northern Ireland. They had a son, Matt, then a daughter, Katie. For years, the family and their supporters rallied to bring awareness to their own troubles with immigration authorities.

In 1998, CBS featured the Morrison family in a documentary titled "Before Your Eyes: Don't Take My Daddy."

"I always felt that our campaign was an extension of the hunger strike," said Broderick, now 77.

They had a major breakthrough in 2000 when then-Attorney General Janet Reno said in a prepared statement that she had been advised by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to drop deportation proceedings against the deportees to "support and promote the process of reconciliation that has begun in Northern Ireland."

The men could stay, but they still couldn't apply for a green card, let alone U.S. citizenship, because of their deferred immigration status.

"People don't realize how much of a minefield U.S. immigration law is," Morrison said.

Matthew Morrison, second from the right, stands with incarcerated Irish Republican Army soldiers in 1975. (The Marshall Project/Courtesy of the Morrison family)

Over the years, delayed work authorizations sidelined him from his job for months at a time, he said. He worked about 20 years as a nurse in Missouri, including stints at a children’s hospital and several state mental health facilities. He said he presented at the St. Louis County Police Academy on topics including mental health and deescalation tactics.

"It doesn’t matter what I did, Immigration gave me no credit for it," Morrison said.

Homeland Security and ICE officials didn't respond to requests for comment.

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In June, before Morrison self-deported, a scheduled check-in with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services in St. Louis put him and his family on edge. Their fears were heightened by stories about immigrants being detained at routine appointments, regardless of legal status. At the appointment, authorities took a photo of Morrison and he was free to go.

"We were terrified that they were just going to take him right there," said his son, Matt, 37.

He said the uncertainty weighed on his father more than he'd ever seen.

"He has to live under that fear of somebody knocking on the door and dragging him out of the house, just like they did in Derry when he was young," Matt said. "I hate it. I am just worried about him. Until recently, I hadn't heard him cry about it."

He has mixed feelings about his father's departure.

"He's got brothers and sisters over there, but we are all here — and his grandkids," Matt said. "He spends a lot of time with his grandkids."

Morrison's daughter, Katie Bradley, 34, said a recent farewell gathering, held in a backyard, felt like a funeral. She panicked because her U.S. passport had expired.

"Even though he's still alive, I feel like I am grieving," she said. "It’s a huge loss for me and my children."

Morrison's wife, Sandra Riley Swift, has a house in St. Charles, Missouri, as well as her mother and many grandchildren. After helping Morrison transition into an apartment in the town where he grew up, she said in a social media post that she's going to straddle both countries for a while.

"This was not an easy choice, but a necessary one for his health and safety," she wrote a few days after they left the U.S.