The routine deportation of noncitizens for minor drug crimes has long been criticized as one of the more absurd aspects of federal immigration policy. The same offenses that result in a hand slap for citizens become the legal justification for shattering dreams and splintering families when committed by a noncitizen.

Thanks to the struggles of a Tunisian deportee named Moones Mellouli — and the legal team that championed his cause all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court — the law is now a little less heartless and a lot more clear.

A well-regarded math professor at the University of Missouri (and, at the time, lawful permanent resident), Mellouli was deported in 2012 following his conviction in state court in Kansas on one count of possession of drug paraphernalia. What was the paraphernalia that led the government to drop the hammer on the math prof? His sock, actually.

Mellouli was deported because, following a traffic arrest in Kansas, he was found to have concealed several Adderall pills in his sock. Although he never admitted in court to illicit possession of the prescription stimulant, he did cop to the paraphernalia charge. That structured plea bargain — made possible by a Kansas law that allows virtually any receptacle to be considered drug paraphernalia — was aimed to avoid immigration consequences.

However, federal authorities took the position that since possession of a controlled substance is deportable offense, a drug paraphernalia conviction must be, too.

Last summer, after a long legal fight, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the government can’t deport a lawful resident by making such inferences. Rather, the court said, the crime of conviction itself must be a deportable offense. The Supreme Court had two issues with the government’s case. First, nothing in the record identified the drug as a controlled substance, which was necessary to get to whether paraphernalia was involved. Second, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg essentially wrote, “Really? A sock?”

“At over time, this will extend to thousands of people with paraphernalia convictions because there are states all over the country with statutory structures that are similar to Kansas,” said Ben Casper, the director of the Center for New Americans at the University of Minnesota Law School. “It was gratifying to be able to bring some sense of proportionality to the deportation laws, which has really been lacking in recent years.”

Collaboration was essential to that victory, as students and staff at the law clinic joined forces with the attorneys from the Immigrant Law Center of Minnesota and a pro bono team from Faegre Baker Daniels.

—Mike Mosedale