

A New Day for DREAMers

Posted: 06/20/2012 4:31 pm

What a difference a day made for undocumented youth who so long have feared deportation. President Obama's offer of provisional legal status is a life-changer for countless youth who may someday attain permanent legal status under the pending DREAM Act.

I can vouch for the transformation of the Trail of Dreams activists. They walked 1,500 miles from Miami to Washington D.C. in 2009 in an effort to promote the DREAM Act and other reforms: Gaby Pacheco came from Ecuador at age 7; Carlos Roa from Venezuela at 2; Felipe Sousa-Rodriguez from Brazil at 14; and Juan Sousa-Rodriguez from Colombia at 6, who had just become a legal permanent resident.

At the time, we at AI Justice feared they would be arrested and deported during the trek. So we submitted requests for each of them to be granted "deferred action" - the discretionary relief now offered to 800,000 "DREAMers." Though the Trail kids all excelled in school and community service, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) denied them back then.

Of course, they ignored our lawyerly advice to not march. I spoke at their send off at Miami's Freedom Tower and kept track of them online and by phone. I cringed watching video when they braved a KKK rally that vowed to "eradicate" Latinos. I bit my nails when they "came out" as undocumented on CNN. When they arrived in D.C., I shed tears as they told their stories at the news conference we organized for them. Then I saw them inspire other DREAMers to come out and a national push for the DREAM Act.

Now they are savoring the possibilities that deferred action offers DREAMers.

Gaby is planning to get married. She may go back to school and travel to Puerto Rico. "It's like birds in a cage, desperate to go out. When they finally can get out, they fly so fast," she told me. "The door is open."

Felipe will finally drive with a license. "Every time I go on a plane I won't be looking over my shoulder, worrying if the TSA will look at the back of my passport and see it doesn't have visa," he said. "I will have worker protections. I'll be able to have a normal life. I also will be watching people in my community finally fulfilling their dreams."

Shocked when he heard the news, Carlos dreamed of being an architect for years. "Finally I can actually work in an architecture office," he told me. "When people come together, things happen. It's a great lesson for social justice."

Juan also is overjoyed. "There is a sigh of relief in this country for young people that have only wanted to fully contribute to the nation they call home," Juan mused. "What was painful about receiving my own green card after 14 years being undocumented was the knowledge of all the hard-working and deserving individuals that should be afforded the same opportunities."

Thanks to President Obama and DHS, the new DREAMer program is a lifeline. With deferred action, they can apply to renew their status every two years indefinitely. They also may apply for driver's licenses. Finally, DREAMers are poised to unleash a flood of homegrown immigrant talent that will benefit us all.

The program does have limits. It's not a path to permanent legal status. The administration can revoke it at any time. And though the estimated 800,000 potential beneficiaries is a large number, the program, ignores more than 10 million other undocumented immigrants, many of them with deep roots, U.S. citizen relatives, valuable talents and deserving a chance to legalize.

Today the world is undergoing a technological revolution. We compete with countries that are fast evolving knowledge-based industries. Will the United States have the number of PhDs, rocket scientists, computer engineers, and other experts demanded by our economy? Will we remain prosperous as Baby Boomers retire and leave shortages of skilled workers? Will we have enough workers to tend our fields and supply our dinner tables? Will we have enough high-caliber military recruits to protect our nation?

Our broken immigration system must be reinvented. We can't afford the increasingly partisan, anti-immigrant vitriol seen in Congress in recent years. We need sensible solutions. As former Florida Governor Jeb Bush recently said, "You have to deal with this issue. You can't ignore it, and so [it's] either a path to citizenship, which I would support and that does put me probably out of the mainstream of most conservatives, or a path to residency of some kind."

The United States needs a new immigration system that meets the demands of the 21st century. Congress must stop the bickering and do what our nation of immigrants and its values demand. Meanwhile, Gaby, Carlos, Felipe, and legions of other DREAMers are ready to spread their wings

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/susana-barciela/obama-dream-act_b_1613448.html