

DREAMERS IN ACTION

JAYELLE LOZOYA*

“If my mouth has a roof, then my tongue is a one story house. If my tongue is a one story house, then I must’ve built this house from the ground up [. . .] But this house is not meant for me. What I’ve confused for emptiness is just a room for you, precious guests. Here, take my breath. Here is my bed, a place to rest your head.”¹

The recent decision in *United States v. Texas*² has left the future of many undocumented immigrants throughout the country in a state of uncertainty. The Supreme Court of the United States delivered a single-lined opinion which read, “The judgment is affirmed by an equally divided Court.” This decision affirmed the 5th Circuit’s upholding of a preliminary injunction to the Deferred Action of Parents of Americans (“DAPA”). DAPA, a follow-up extension to the 2012 Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (“DACA”), had the potential of granting a temporary deportation protection to an estimated 4.3 million undocumented immigrants.³ Although the DREAM Act has been unable to successfully pass through the Senate, it has inspired undocumented individuals to chase their dreams.

Amidst a powerful, game-changing, media-driven presidential election, the rhetoric of frustration, disappointment, and fear has surrounded social movements such as #BlackLivesMatter, gun-control regulations, LGBTQ rights, and immigration reform. However, there seems to be a beacon of light in recent stories dealing with undocumented immigrants in the United States. They are reaching for their dreams and speaking out for a community that feels as though it has been cast into the shadows of America, the very place its members call home. These individuals share a common story and together utilize their voices to advocate and push back against the negative rhetoric on the approximately 11 million undocumented individuals living in the United States.

* J.D. Candidate for 2018, South Texas College of Law Houston.

1. Zachary Caballero, *The Bricks We Kiss*, Skinnin’ The Pachuco (Apr. 30, 2016), <https://skinninthepachuco.wordpress.com>.

2. *United States v. Texas*, 136 S. Ct. 2271 (2016) (mem.).

3. American Immigration Council, *Understanding the Legal Challenges to Executive Action* (June 28, 2016), <http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/just-facts/understanding-legal-challenges-executive-action>.

What is the biggest difference between a high school valedictorian's speech in McKinney, Texas and a valedictorian's speech in Austin, Texas? Well, this year only about three and half hours. On June 3, 2016, Mayte Lara Ibarra, the valedictorian at David Crocket High School, and Larissa Martinez, the valedictorian at McKinney Boyd High School, both addressed their graduating classes and publicly shared a similar controversial secret: they are undocumented individuals. Mayte took to Twitter to share through social media the following message, "Valedictorian, 4.5 GPA, full tuition paid for at UT, 13 cords/medals [. . .] Oh, and I'm undocumented." Mayte's message unexpectedly went viral and attracted both positive and negative attention throughout the country. Some strangers praised Mayte for defying stereotypes, while others responded to her message by sending her screenshots of the tips they submitted to the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. One of the people who denounced Mayte, the mother of one of her classmates, said, "Something else that I have NEVER thought I would support until this moment is Trump and #buildthatwall."⁴

From the podium at her graduation, Larissa Martinez made the same courageous decision to share her story. Larissa's mother left an abusive, alcoholic husband in Mexico and fled to the United States when Larissa was 11 years old. In just six short years, Larissa had come to a new country and became the valedictorian of McKinney Boyd High School with a 4.95 GPA. Larissa was awarded a scholarship to Yale University to study medicine and become a neurosurgeon. Larissa's message resonated with the public. Although she did not once mention the particular politician she was referring to, her message was clear: if you want to change America for the better, "make America great again without the construction of a wall built on hatred and prejudice." Larissa went on to tell the crowd about her personal life, about how she lives in a one-bedroom apartment sharing a bed with her mother and younger sister, without internet, or a washer and dryer. Yet, despite those hardships, something that she always had is "knowledge," which she found in her school library and in her studies. Although Larissa applied for citizenship seven years ago, her application has still not been adjudicated. Larissa points out that the expectations for her as a Mexican, as a first generation immigrant, as a female, as an undocumented person, and as a low-income individual were very low, as evidenced throughout the media. However, the low expectations were not her reality and pushed her forward. She said, "They told me I couldn't, so I did."⁵

4. Katie Rogers, *2 Valedictorians in Texas Declare Undocumented Status, and Outrage Ensues*, N. Y. TIMES, June 10, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/11/us/2-valedictorians-in-texas-declare-undocumented-status-and-outrage-ensues.html?_r=0.

5. *Id.*

Sergio Garcia was brought into the United States illegally from Mexico when he was only nine years old, he became his high school's valedictorian, graduated from college and law school, and passed the state bar exam to become a fully licensed attorney. But, to his dismay, his ability to uphold the faithful execution of the law was challenged by those who believed that an illegal immigrant should not be permitted to practice law.⁶ That challenge went all the way up to the California Supreme Court, which held in Sergio's favor. In a recent Facebook post, Sergio said that thanks to the California Supreme Court he is "being admitted to the bar" and that "[t]his one is for all of you who dare to dream and by doing so change the world."⁷

My story is a lot like that of other Dreamers, full of novelty, adversity, and even fear. I am a first generation Mexican-American born to immigrant parents in Brownsville, Texas, who hoped that their children would have the chance to pursue the American dream. For the first five years of my life, I lived in Matamoros, Tamaulipas, Mexico. There, I experienced a rich Latin culture that involved a strong foundation of simplicity and hard work. Spanish was the first language that I learned, and as my mom recalls, I was against learning English because it "sounded ugly." My parents left behind their country, family, and all they had built together due to economic uncertainty and out of the pure desire to give their children better opportunities. Although my parents have only a middle school education, they have taught me the most valuable lessons I have learned in life. For instance, through their constant hard work, I learned to value the rewarding accomplishment of a job well done and satisfaction in achieving your goals.

As a first generation Mexican-American, it was difficult to find my voice, "mi voz." I was lucky enough to experience two cultures simultaneously, my American educational life and the rich Latin culture at home. It was, however, often a struggle for me to balance the constant societal pressure for assimilation and my desire to honor and remain authentic to my heritage. I went on to become the first in my family to graduate from high school, then college, and, in two years from now, law school. Like most children of immigrant parents, I share a common fear of having my parents deported. As a child, I remember getting off the school bus one day and feeling my heart drop into my stomach when I did not see my parents' car at home, as I feared that they had been taken. As a young adult, that fear developed into a rabid determination to protect my parents and push for

6. California Courts, *California Supreme Court Admits Undocumented Immigrant to State Bar* (Jan. 2, 2014), <http://www.courts.ca.gov/24673.htm>.

7. Catherine E. Shoichet & Tom Watkins, *No green card? No problem — undocumented immigrant can practice law*, *Court Says*, CNN (Jan. 3, 2014), <http://www.cnn.com/2014/01/02/justice/california-immigrant-lawyer/>.

laws that could guarantee their peace of mind as well as mine. This is just one of the many adversities that undocumented individuals along with their family and friends have to overcome.

I have paved a way for my own success by embracing what makes me different from those on television, magazine covers, the board of directors, CEOs, and most partners at law firms. It was through opportunities by organizations which seek out diversity that I was afforded scholarships, job opportunities, and networking connections that remain invaluable to me in the legal community. While my story is not particularly extraordinary, it is a testament to what individuals are willing and capable of doing in the face of adversity when given opportunities and allowed to chase their dreams.