My Life as a DREAMer who ACTed Beyond the Barriers: From Growing Up “Undocumented” in Arizona to a Master’s Degree from Harvard

by Silvia P. Rodríguez Vega

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“Like a candle braving the wind, I refused to burn out.”
— Samuel Diaz Morales, friend of the author, 2010

My life as a DREAM Act student has never been easy. The DREAM Act, defined as the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act, is an effort to establish a path to citizenship for some children of illegal immigrants. Most of my peers in this situation face endless stress, experience discrimination, and walk on paths with dead ends. My story begins like the thousands of other students who are in my shoes. My parents brought me into the United States when I was too young to remember. In my case, I was two years old and came to the United States with a tourist visa that expired

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years later. My mother and father were dreaming of a future for me filled with education and opportunity. They could never have foreseen the events that would happen as I grew into an adult and the suffering our family would endure because of our legal status.

As a child, I never saw myself as any different from my peers. I learned English while watching Barney & Friends and loved sleepovers and pizza parties. I grew up with many mentors and role models who demonstrated that women like me could go on and earn a postsecondary education. Much of my inspiration came from the community service projects I joined when I was ten. I was a peer health leader and became very active in theater and other arts for social change. I wanted to help people, and I knew that to do so effectively and at the highest level would require an education.

However, trying to obtain a driving permit and looking into scholarships for college brought the realization that I was not normal. Unlike my friends, I was unable to get a driver's license or apply for many scholarships because my undocumented status did not permit me to do so. But I decided not to give up. I applied and was accepted to Arizona State University (ASU), receiving the Maroon and Gold Scholarship.

In 2006, in the middle of my sophomore year, however, Arizona voters passed Proposition 300, which forced undocumented students to pay out-of-state tuition and further made them ineligible for state, federal, and university-based scholarships. I was devastated and thought my dreams were over. Students affected by this proposition—undocumented students and allies—protested, embarked on seven-day hunger strikes, and lobbied members of Congress including then Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, but Prop 300 passed and the DREAM Act was nowhere in sight.

Collaboration between student groups and the university's administration allowed us to continue for another year, but our scholarships were taken away again due to harassment from the state legislature. I attended a Chicano Latino faculty meeting and told them what was happening to students like me. The following week ASU President Michael Crow met with Chicanos Por La Causa (CPLC), a community development corporation in Phoenix, and CPLC launched the American Dream Fund to help us finance our education. However, students who were freshmen when I was graduating are now without the funds to continue their education because CPLC wasn't able to meet its fund-raising goals. Going through these events felt like being seasick, caught in the ups and downs of a political storm.

When I was in my senior year in college and it looked like I was going to make it, my family decided to leave Arizona. The daily harassment and community raids, due both to my efforts to challenge the proposition as well as a general sentiment against undocumented individuals, were
threatening my family, so they moved to the Midwest. This was a very difficult situation for my family. In just one week, my younger brother and sister were pulled from school, and my family had to sell or give away everything for which we had worked so hard over the past eighteen years to acquire. I sold my car and everything but my paintings, some clothes, pictures, and books. I told my mom that I had a place to live and not to worry about me. She did not know that I actually had no place to go. I hid in my friend’s dorm room and then lived with nine different people over the following two years while I finished college as I lacked the funds for room and board.

My family members returned to Arizona for my graduation. While many of my classmates were thrilled and celebratory, I was in a strange stage of emotions. Part of me was happy because I had made it. Yet most of me was sad and frustrated at the uncertainty of my future. I was not sure what I would do after graduation, I had no opportunities for employment due to my status, and I was not even sure where I would live.

After graduation, I continued my community organizing, making art, and working with youth. Yet, I felt like a big part of me was missing. I went to visit Professor Carlos Vélez-Ibañez who had been my mentor at ASU. When I told him that I was interested in graduate school and why, he said, “Muchacha, you want six Ph.Ds!” He encouraged me to do some research and come back in a week. When I returned to his office he pointed me to his computer where he described a program that incorporated many of my areas of interest. When I realized it was at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education, I looked at him with eyes so wide open they threatened to fall out of my head. So many questions were running through my mind: You really think I can make it? How will I get in? He looked at me with believing eyes and said, “That’s where you need to go.”

The process to apply was long and exhausting. I focused all my attention, mind, heart, time, and resources on the application. My mentors sponsored my application fees and GRE preparation. I had never worked so hard and prayed so hard. In March 2010 I was accepted. It was just like I had dreamed, pictured, and visualized. It began with a letter saying, “Congratulations.” It took me days to believe it. When I finally did, I truly thought I was going to die because I thought being accepted was the best thing that could ever happen to me. I could not fathom anything better happening to someone like me—pushed out, criminalized, and undocumented—than being offered an education from Harvard.

I moved forward and submitted my application for financial aid. The cost of tuition alone was $40,000; including room, board, and very conservative living expenses, it would be much closer to $70,000 for the one-year program. Harvard could only offer me a $10,000 grant. Without the opportunity to receive financial aid or loans, my worries increased. I would need to raise $60,000 from other sources. However, I was not going to give up that easily. With a group of good-hearted people who called themselves Friends of Harvard, I began a campaign called Harvard Si Se Puede!— “Harvard, yes I can!”—to raise money to help fund my education.

It has been a miraculous process. People from the most humble walks of life have stepped up to help me get to where I am now—at Harvard. Working with
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community groups and churches, we’ve held bake sales, art shows, and other fund-raising events. I applied for every scholarship I could find and received a few. Despite all my efforts, I kept having moments where I could not understand how this could be possible. Nonetheless, I woke up everyday determined to do it not just for myself, but for all the other students who knew my pain. I was determined to prove that my legal status did not validate or invalidate my humanity. I was simultaneously angry and inspired. But most importantly, I wanted to prove to all undocumented students that any dream could be achieved.

I made it to Harvard, despite a funding deficit. I simply had faith that I would make it. I was not sure how I’d manage to get the rest of the money; I only knew that this was bigger than me.

Right when finals began in the fall semester, I got a call from my sister telling me to pray for our mother. I thought my mother had been injured. I called back right away and found out that my sister’s high school was calling U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) on our mother. I was in complete disbelief; I could not understand why or how this was happening.

I dropped everything and flew to be with my mother and sister. My mother was not in custody so when I arrived we decided to leave the house. We drove to a town where we had a relative. As soon as we arrived my mother had a stroke, and we took her to the hospital. She was there a week, and the doctors told me she needed medical treatment and medication, which she had no access to because she could not legally obtain health insurance. As a family we decided that it would be best for my mother to return to Mexico to be with the rest of our family there so she could receive the medical care she needed. She will not be allowed to return to the United States for ten years. Though still in the United States, because my father is sick and my brother is in prison, only my sister will be able to see me graduate from Harvard in the spring of 2011.

Rewinding back to the day my mother and father brought me to the United States, I do not think this is what they pictured when they thought of the “American Dream.” To be honest, our lives have at times felt almost like the American Nightmare.

In December 2010, the DREAM Act failed to pass the U.S. Senate, leaving its future uncertain. Consequently, undocumented youth are dropping out of school in record numbers, and families are being torn apart by xenophobic immigration policy in Arizona. But I keep fighting. I fight for the youth who are not ready to give up. I fight for the children who
cannot defend themselves, and I scream for the millions who remain voiceless.

My goals are to help my sister attend college and to be her mentor and role model like the ones I’ve had in my life; to publish a book from a child’s perspective on immigration and Sheriff Joe Arpaio in Arizona and the effect his raids have had on children whose parents have been detained and/or deported; to obtain a Ph.D.; to help as many students as possible follow their dreams; and to seek justice and create change for future generations and the people of Arizona. One day I hope to run my own school and start my own nonprofit with a focus on community empowerment through the arts and educational advancement for underserved people.

The same fire that burned inside me when I was a child continues to burn today. My mission is to help people, and that is why I refuse to let the flame even flicker. I brave the wind, and nothing can stand in my way.

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