

A Tale of Two Undocumented Graduates

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Raul Rodriguez and Alberto Ledesma live parallel lives. Both proudly claim UC Berkeley as their alma mater. Both have worked hard academically. And both have published personal essays about the stigma of being an undocumented student.

But that's where their lives diverge. Ledesma was fortunate enough to gain amnesty via the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), federal legislation that granted amnesty to immigrants who entered the U.S. before 1986. Rodriguez, on the other hand, remains undocumented because legislation like IRCA no longer exists.

"Even now, years after amnesty, I get all tongue-tied when anyone asks me about my immigrant past. I become that undocumented immigrant Cantinflas, twisting words and phrases until nothing I say makes sense. The problem is, I don't know where my Cantinflas and where the true me begins."

Rodriguez says he shares that same feeling of being constantly distressed. If he were granted amnesty, he says he would take every opportunity that presented itself, the simplest of all being travel. Before discovering he was undocumented, Rodriguez had plans to move to New York City and Paris, but all of those plans disappeared upon hearing the truth about his legal status.

"Being undocumented means re-shifting your life and not doing what you love," he notes.

Today, Rodriguez lives a life that he can only describe as "going through the motions." He is not alone. A study conducted by the Immigration Policy Center in 2008 showed that 25 percent of all people in the U.S. are either an immigrant or the child of an immigrant. The same study concluded that 40 percent of all immigrants currently in the U.S. came to this country before 1990, which suggests that they've since established deep roots in this country. Many are like Ledesma and Rodriguez, having grown up in the U.S. yet never fully embraced as Americans.

Many like Rodriguez are holding out hope for some sort of legislation, like the Dream Act, which if passed into law would open a pathway to citizenship for undocumented students who either enroll in college or join the armed forces.

The Dream Act, however, could come with caveats. Applicants would need to prove that they entered the country when they were under the age of 16, that they have lived continuously in the U.S. for at least five years, and that they obtained a diploma from a U.S. high school or earned their GED, according to whitehouse.gov. Students with a criminal record would also be barred from receiving any benefits offered under the Dream Act.

Since being granted amnesty under IRCA, Ledesma has obtained a PhD in Ethnic Studies, works at UC Berkeley's Student Learning Center and contributes essays to various media outlets on issues of immigration. He's hoping to soon publish his book.

For Rodriguez, the American Dream has proved more elusive. He hopes the eventual passage of the Dream Act will lift the weight of being undocumented off his shoulders, like IRCA did for Ledesma.

"Even just driving, it sucks you know, it definitely sucks. I dream and fantasize about all the things I would accomplish if I just had the chance," Rodriguez explains. "If I just had the opportunity."

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