ucla undocumented immigrant students speak out

underground undergrads

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amazing grace

Mariana D. Zamboni

Mariana interviewed Grace Lee for this profile of an academically promising Korean immigrant student who reached a crossroads and was forced to make a life-altering decision about her immigration status. Although this is a real account of an undocumented student's life, a pseudonym has been used to protect the identity of the person profiled.

Grace's kindness drew me to her one day while we were attending the same tutoring session offered by the Academic Advancement Program at UCLA. As our friendship developed, I learned that we share a secret: the secret of feeling invisible due to our immigration status. We both know what it means to be an undocumented immigrant student in one of the most prestigious universities in the United States. This is a glimpse into the life of my friend, an amazing young Korean American college woman.

Grace lived a comfortable life with her parents and two siblings in South Korea. Her mother was a housewife, and her father owned a construction business. Through the collective efforts of additional family members, Grace's family was well-off. She lived a happy and pleasant life until she was eleven years old, when suddenly things started to change.

I remember it was around 1997. Korea didn't have money, so we were going through IMF, where we had to borrow money from the USA. Most businesses were going out of business because [of] bankruptcy, and my dad's company was one of them.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) helps oversee global financial systems and acts like a bank by offering countries financial and technical assistance. South Korea became one of these countries in need, and Grace's family was just one of many impacted by globalization. The economic instability in South Korea forced her family to seek various ways to survive. Migration became the solution.

Grace's father decided to immigrate to Canada in 1996 because "in Canada you don't need a visa. You can just go." It was the farthest he could travel from Korea without a visa. Despite his fervent desire to work and send money to his family in South Korea, he was unable to find a job for nine months. In addition to the economic uncertainty he was facing, Grace's father also faced the emotional burdens of being apart from his wife and children. Very few Koreans lived in Canada, and he felt very isolated. Because he was having difficulty adjusting, the rest of the Lee family moved to Canada to be reunited with him.

Living in Canada was difficult and as a result, Grace's parents thought about

The talk with her counselor gave Grace hope. **Dreams** that had faded because she lacked a **nine-digit** number were reawakened.

moving again. They believed that Los Angeles would offer them better economic, educational, and social opportunities. To achieve the dream of moving to Los Angeles, Grace, her mother, and her siblings returned to South Korea because they wanted to enter the United States legally. They purchased student visas and moved to Los Angeles.

Unfortunately Grace's father was not able to return to South Korea because he had fled the country illegally after filing for bankruptcy. Grace's father had no option but to enter the United States illegally. He paid a smuggler to drive him from Canada to Los Angeles, while he hid in the trunk of a car for three hours. I thought about how the media bombards us with images of undocumented Latino immigrants being smuggled across the Mexican border, but it is rare to hear of an undocumented Asian immigrant entering the United States in this manner.

Grace's parents believed that living in Koreatown, a district near downtown Los Angeles, would be detrimental for their acquisition of the English language. As a result, they settled in a city in the San Fernando Valley. Grace felt a sense of security and stability as she began her new life in the United States. Little did she know that it was just the beginning of a difficult journey.

Grace was eleven when she moved to Los Angeles in 1998. Regardless of the private tutoring in English that she had received in South Korea, her knowledge of the language was rudimentary, and she was not able to communicate well. She remembers using an electronic dictionary often. Her English-as-a-second-language (ESL) teacher helped her gain confidence with her English verbal abilities. Grace also counted on her mother's encouragement to pursue higher education.

My mom always told me, "You have to go to college or else you'll end up like your dad and me . . . If you want to have better opportunities, and you want better for your children later on, you need to go to college and get a degree." So I always had that in the back of my mind.

The high school that Grace attended was in a lower-income neighborhood and had few Korean students, which her mother believed would encourage her children to practice English. Grace had high academic potential; she graduated with a 4.23 grade point average and was valedictorian of her class.

I was surprised to learn that Grace was not undocumented during high school. Because she had entered the country on a student visa, she was considered an international student. Although she was not classified as an undocumented immigrant on paper, she felt as if she were living the life of an undocumented immigrant student because of her inability to access benefits given to those with proof of U.S. citizenship—fee waivers, most scholarships, financial aid and many academic

enrichment programs, and a driver's license. Although Grace had the opportunity to renew her student visa, she chose not to. She gave up her status as an international student visa holder in exchange for being an undocumented immigrant so that she could qualify for in-state tuition under AB 540. This decision was based on the knowledge Grace acquired from her older sister and college friends who were benefiting from the legislation.

Grace was aware that undocumented immigrant students were attending college but during her senior year of high school, she reached a low point in her life. While most of her friends were applying to various universities, she was not, because of financial concerns. Her high school counselor could not understand why the top student in the school was not applying to colleges.

She said, "You cannot give up. I'm going to try to find out all the scholarships I can for you and help you out, but don't give up now." She was the one that encouraged me to still apply—and see what happens later on.

The talk with her counselor gave Grace hope. Dreams that had faded because she lacked a nine-digit number were reawakened. As I listened to her story, I felt and embraced her agony. I was inspired to look at both our lives and to acknowledge how, in spite of coming from different places, growing up in different environments, and having different customs and languages, we shared something special—a very unique hope.

Grace as a child. *Courtesy of Grace Lee.*

We empathized with each other because we were engaged in the same struggle.

Grace had high hopes of attending UC Berkeley, but she could not afford the tuition and living expenses. Instead she chose UCLA so that she could live at home, and her parents could help with expenses. She commutes up to four hours every day. According to her, commuting has affected her social life. Grace has not met any other undocumented Asian students at UCLA, but she assures me that "there are plenty." I asked about the barriers she has encountered as an undocumented student.

Most of my friends are U.S. citizens. They have grants, financial aid . . . They don't have to pay for tuition . . . Some of my other friends are so rich, they say, "How much is tuition? I don't even know. My parents pay

Grace feels that her **immigration** status has led her to **establish** an important life goal: **helping** others.

for it." And whenever I hear that comment, it just hurts so much. They don't have to do anything . . . and I have to work crazy hours [to] pay for tuition, and study at the same time.

I understood, and we cried together. Yet we saw our hope grow stronger, united in one purpose. Above all the challenges, fears, and tears, Grace has been able to persist and hopes to graduate in 2008. She wants to pursue graduate studies in the field of education. Grace hopes that everything will be resolved with her immigration paperwork so she can "work for high school students and help any undocumented student or any minority student that needs my help." Although being an undocumented immigrant student has been a hardship, Grace feels that her immigration status has led her to establish an important life goal: helping others. In her own words, if she had not been undocumented, she would be "so much different."

I would be easygoing, not knowing what to do with my life. I don't know what I would be doing . . . wasting my time going clubbing, drinking, wasting money. But because I am [undocumented], I have my goals and my dream that I want to help others.

Although her parents feel pain every time they see her struggle, she comforts them by saying that she does not regret anything and that she has "learned so much." Someday, she says, "all struggles will be paid off."

The lives of students like Grace—the 65,000 undocumented students who graduate from high schools annually nationwide—will change radically if the Dream Act is signed into law. The Dream Act would provide a path to citizenship for undocumented students like Grace. If the Dream Act is enacted, she and thousands of other students will not only feel visible but also be able to contribute economically by working in their respective fields. Grace's long and unique journey has shown me that it's possible to see strength in weakness and that humans have an incredible ability to cope. She is truly an amazing Grace.

Immigrant Voices. *By Mario Escobar.*

I
I am the backbone
An equal to any
The chant at the end of the day

I am the caresser of voluptuous earth
Her and I become one
The hands that pluck and pick
to satisfy your hunger

I am the tender callus
The naked wind
The new tongue

Flesh seeking peace

I am the silent lip
The gaze that shouts

II
Like a lonely violin
Reciting the dew of our forehead
I ignite the internal breath
Letting loose the burning vortex

Who I am
What I am
It is what your eyes do not perceive

An absent smile
River of solitude
Insurgent fist
Under the silky shadows

Listen when I speak
A simple voice
A broken voice
A tortured voice
Unfolding silence

A raped motherland
A ride on the train
at the cost of
One leg
One arm

Shattered bodies
Burned down bodies
Cut bodies
Undocumented bodies

I am an oral book
And the result of your apathy

III
Undocumented bodies
Dehydrated bodies
Broken voices

Cochineal insects
Spread like butter
On the sidewalk of memory

Clashing spaces
Shouldering time

I plead
I plead
Cry soul of mine
Cry soul of mine

Cry...
for it's cold as Dante's hell
where demons sing
about being strong, being demons.

Cry soul of mine
Cry soul of mine

Cry...

Mario at fast. *Photograph by Jessica Chou*

fighting another war

Erika Perez

Erika interviewed and profiled Mario Escobar. Although Mario's childhood was filled with tragedy, his resilience has led to success as an artist, a student, and an activist in the United States.

Mario Escobar was born on January 19, 1978, in El Salvador. When he was four years old, his mother left him to move to the United States. Mario's childhood was deeply affected by the social upheaval that was taking place in his hometown. In the 1980s, the government of El Salvador was at war with a guerrilla group of communists and leftists known as the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front. The presence of slaughtered, sometimes headless bodies lying on the street was common in El Salvador.

One day as Mario and his father walked to the fishermen's union, they passed a crowd of people standing next to a military truck. As they walked over to see what was happening, Mario's father, Angel Ebaristo Escobar, grabbed his son and placed his little head against his chest as tears began to fall from his cheeks. Lying on the floor were Mario's two cousins and his grandmother, who had been brutally killed. "You become numb," were the words Mario used to describe his experience with death. "That's the only word I can think of." Mario described this graphic scene as one that he internalized: "Growing up was very difficult as a kid, having to witness fierce combat, the gruesome atrocities . . . It was so ugly that I will tell you this much: death became something normal. You would look at a dead body and . . . pretty much, it was normal."

When Mario turned eight, he was hit with the news that his father had been killed. It was a horrible death, by lethal injection. At the young age of eleven, Mario ran away from home and picked up a weapon. Having studied Marxist theory, he decided to join the revolution and fight with the people who were facing the social injustices in his country. The tragedy continued: Mario was soon kidnapped. As soon as Mario's mother heard about his kidnapping, she returned to El Salvador and discovered that he had been released. She brought Mario back with her to the United States, only to return him a year later to El Salvador while she settled in the United States.

In 1993 at the age of fifteen, Mario decided to head to the United States on his own, traveling by train. During the trip, he was beaten several times and barely escaped being raped. After arriving in the United States, he began working as a gardener

Growing up was very **difficult** as a kid, having to witness fierce combat, the gruesome **atrocities** . . . It was so ugly that I will tell you this much: **death** became something **normal.**

and enrolled himself at Jefferson High School. At that time, the campaign to pass Proposition 187 was underway. The unfairness of the measure, which was designed to deny education, medical services, and other social services to anyone who was undocumented, impassioned Mario. His childhood experiences empowered him to organize many of the high school walkouts protesting against the passage of the proposition. He had moved, he said, from "one civil war to another, only this time without the bullets."

Mario's experiences led him to become an activist and an agent of positive social change. He educated himself about social injustice and was inspired to get involved with his community. Soon after the passage of AB 540, Mario enrolled in a community college and then transferred to UCLA, where he took on a double major in literature and Spanish. The transition to a four-year college was not easy. Mario had become a father while in community college, and he was burdened with paying tuition out of his pocket because his legal status made him ineligible for

When people think of academics, they generally picture books and lecture halls. My understanding of academics goes beyond the lecture halls. It involves what we usually read in the books—real-life experiences. I was born in El Salvador during the early period of the Salvadoran civil war; thus, I can say that my academic experience began at the age of five when I witnessed my grandmother's limbs smeared on the pavement. Next to her were my two cousins and two other victims unknown to me. At six, my twenty-year-old mother had fled the country for fear of persecution. At nine, my father had been killed for his involvement in the civil war. At eleven, I held in my hands an M-16 and was told to shoot anything that interferes with the struggle. At twelve, I was kidnapped and held captive for eleven months. In 1993 I traveled by myself across Guatemala and Mexico so that I could be with my mother. While traveling through Mexico, I saw how people risk their lives just to get to the USA. I remember seeing an old man lose his legs for trying to catch a free ride on the cargo trains. In 1993 I arrived in the United States, adopted a new culture, and learned English in one year. I enrolled in Jefferson High School in South Central Los Angeles, which was another battle zone. Witnessing shootings among gangs in 1993, I felt I was still living through a civil war. In 1996 my mother's lack of understanding and family financial obligations forced me to drop out of high school. In 1998 I decided to attend Los Angeles Trade Tech Community College but unfortunately as an undocumented student, it was hard to come up with the money to pay for my tuition, which forced me to drop out. However, I never gave up. In 2001 I returned to LA Trade Tech. In 2003 I earned my AA in science and liberal arts. That same year, I earned my GED. In 2003 I applied to the UC system and was accepted by UCLA, Cal Berkeley, and UC Riverside. It is 2007, and I am graduating with departmental honors with a dual degree in literature and Chicano studies. I will be starting my master's this fall at ASU. Although this may be seen as the end of a struggle, I can only say that the struggle does not end when one earns a degree. On the contrary, it is merely the beginning of an even bigger struggle.

Spoken word. *By Mario Escobar.*

financial aid and the majority of scholarships. Mario said that his therapy during this time was his pen. He identified himself as a poet and said that writing is like "erasing the bruises."

In his art and his way of life, Mario evidences a deep concern for the well-being of the community. He questions the way the system is set up, and he believes in equality for all people. He shows his love for his country by gaining knowledge and becoming an active citizen. He believes that salaries and educational opportunities should be more equitable for those who work hard and contribute to the economy. He believes that people have the power to make a difference if they get involved.

Mario said that Americans need to open the doors to higher education. Everyone has the right to an education, he added, and when that right is denied, the state contradicts its claim of democracy. Why must undocumented students go through the educational process only to be denied the opportunity to participate in the workforce after they graduate? Some change has to occur.

Mario believes that there are two types of democratic freedom. One is mental freedom. He argued that "when you don't have the information to know your surroundings, you're mentally restrained." The second is physical freedom—when you are allowed to go where you please. Mario noted that one can lead to the other: without knowing what to do mentally, you become physically restrained; you don't know where to go. He believes that although education does not grant you all the freedom you need, it does grant you the freedom that you need to survive in this world.

When asked for his opinion on the immigration debate, Mario explained that we need to give legal status to the immigrants that are in this country and to improve conditions in the countries where they come from. After all, as his story illustrates, it is the economic and political environments that lead people to leave their countries. He added that we need more politicians like Senator Gilbert Cedillo, who truly care about the well-being of people, especially people who are undocumented and in need of a political voice. He believes that there are a lot of "cookie cutters" in the world of politics—those who care only about climbing up the political ladder and forget about the people whose lives are affected by policy and laws.

Mario said that those who have experienced struggles similar to his should ask themselves some philosophical questions: "What is the purpose of life? What is it that you, as an individual, aim at? . . . Do you want to do something just because society tells you what to do? What is it that you aim at?"

Mario's aim is social justice and equality. He also has a personal theory about responsibility. He claims that there are

Mario with Senator Gilbert Cedillo. *Courtesy of IDEAS at UCLA.*

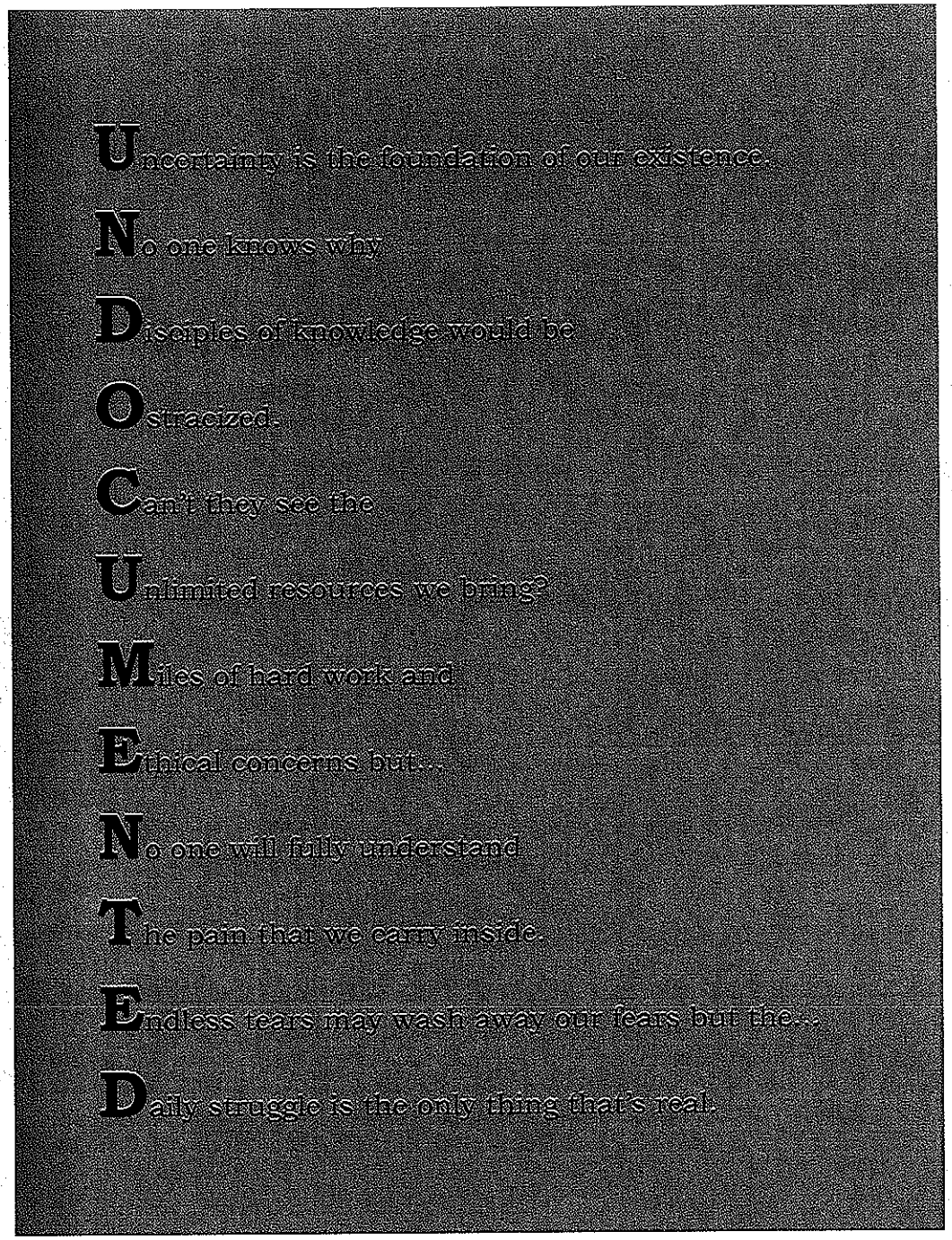
two types of responsibility. One requires you to fulfill duties that you are told to be responsible for, such as taking out the trash. The other requires you to do things you ought to do. For instance, being responsible means being accountable for your own actions and not responding to a harm with retribution, which perpetuates the cycle. We must not continue harmful patterns, he noted. Each of us is responsible for thinking about others as well as ourselves. A person needs to weigh the pros and cons of every situation. Mario stated that his goal is not to reach a utopian society; rather, what matters is that we *try* to reach a utopian society: "In the trajectory of wanting to reach utopia, something good is going to come out of it."

Mario has proven to be a warrior against adversity, and he continues to lead the way for undocumented students. He has published one book and has another on the way. He has started his own publishing company because there are too many voices "that need to be heard." He believes that we are living in a time of "information warfare." We need more oral histories, he stated, and we must develop new theories. He said that the struggle for equality is linked to the spread of new information. His role is to contribute information by publishing his writing. He would like his publishing company to grow, not to gain a lot of money but to disseminate information. He would like to publish children's books that touch on immigrant issues such as AB 540. The need to educate others is his priority.

On May 1, 2007, during the rally in support of undocumented immigrants at MacArthur Park, Mario was struck, both figuratively and literally, by police violence. He filmed the incident and expressed frustration with the police officers who shot rubber bullets at the marchers: "I thought they were real bullets. They sounded like real bullets. I felt a hot sting on my upper chest . . . I saw a guy in front of me fall to the ground, and he screamed."

Mario's perseverance ultimately carried him to a major milestone. In the spring of 2007, after years of deportation hearings and just weeks before he graduated from UCLA, Mario was finally granted political asylum by the United States government. Mario is now attending graduate school at Arizona State University on a full scholarship. He is determined to influence coming generations about social justice and equality through his art.

Undocumented. *By Mariana D. Zamboni.*



Mariana D. Zamboni was born in Guatemala and migrated to Los Angeles at the age of six. She grew up in Pico Union and graduated with a degree in psychology from UCLA. She benefited from the passage of AB 540 in California and will be starting a master's degree in education at Harvard University in Fall 2007. She hopes to continue to fight for accessibility to higher education for all immigrant students.

I wrote this poem on one of those days when hopelessness takes over, and I began wondering, why do I submit myself to such agony. Sometimes I felt that little by little, a piece inside of me would die, and I felt tired of working hard and of being motivated when in the end, I was not going to get anywhere. In those days, the only favorable solution was to quit; but faith in a better tomorrow would always settle in after tears of desolation dried.

testimony of tam tran

Tam Tran

Tam Tran is a courageous undocumented student, who has testified twice before Congress. A twenty-four-year-old graduate of the University of California, Los Angeles, Tam immigrated to America at the age of six. For years Tam's family, refugees from Vietnam, have fought for American citizenship. However, major obstacles in the immigration system have prevented this reality from happening. Below is Tam's testimony before the House Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, Refugees, Border Security and International Law. Following Tam's testimony are two articles that were published about her life in the Los Angeles Times *and* USA Today.

I hate filling out forms, especially the ones that limit me to checking off boxes for categories I don't even identify with. Place of birth? Germany. But I'm not German. Ethnicity? I'm Vietnamese, but I've never been to Vietnam. However, these forms never ask me where I was raised or educated. I was born in Germany, my parents are Vietnamese, but I have been American-raised and -educated for the past eighteen years.

My parents escaped the Vietnam War as boat people and were rescued by the German navy. In Vietnam my mother had to drop out of middle school to help support her family as a street vendor. My father was a bit luckier; he was college educated, but the value of his education has diminished in this country due to his inability to speak English fluently.

They lived in Germany as refugees and during that time, I was born. My family came to the United States when I was six to reunite with relatives who fled to California because, after all, this was America. It is extremely difficult to win a political-asylum case, but my parents took the chance because they truly believed they were asylees of a country they no longer considered home and which also posed a threat to their lives. Despite this, they lost the case. The immigration court ordered us deported to Germany. However, when we spoke to the German consulate, they told us, "We don't want you. You're not German." Germany does not grant birthright citizenship so on application forms, when I come across the question that asks for my citizenship, I rebelliously mark "other" and write in "the world."

But the truth is, I am culturally an American and more specifically, I consider myself a Southern Californian. I grew up watching Speed Racer and Mighty Mouse every Saturday morning. But as of right now, my national identity is not American and even though I can't be removed from American soil, I cannot become an American unless legislation changes.

In December I graduated with a bachelor's degree in American literature and culture with Latin, departmental, and college

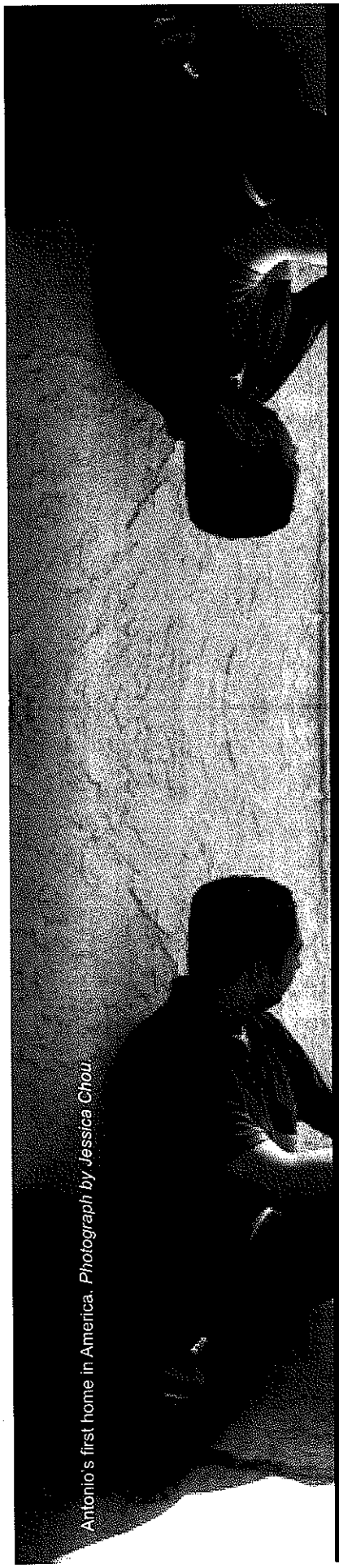
honors from UCLA. I thought, finally, all these years of working multiple jobs and applying to countless scholarships, all while taking more than fifteen units every quarter, were going to pay off. And it did seem to be paying off. I found a job right away in my field as a full-time film editor and videographer with a documentary project at UCLA. I also applied to graduate school and was accepted to a PhD program in cultural studies. I was awarded a department fellowship and the minority fellowship, but the challenges I faced as an undocumented college student began to surface once again.

Except the difference this time is I am twenty-four years old. I suppose this means I'm an adult. I also have a college degree. I guess this also means I'm an educated adult. But for a fact, I know that this means I do have responsibilities to the society I live in. I have the desire and also the ability and skills to help my community by being an academic researcher and socially conscious video documentarian, but I'll have to wait before I can become an accountable member of society. I recently declined the offer to the PhD program because even with these two fellowships, I don't have the money to cover the $50,000 tuition and living expenses. I'll have to wait before I can really grow up. But that's okay, because when you're in my situation you have to learn to, or are forced to, make compromises.

With an adult job, I can save up for graduate school next year. Or at least that's what I thought. Three days ago, the day before I boarded my flight to DC, I was informed that it would be my last day at work. My work permit was expired, and I won't be able to continue working until I receive a new one. Every year I must apply for a renewal, but never have I received it on time. This means every year around this month, I lose the job that I have. But that's okay. Because I've been used to this—to losing things I have worked hard for, not just this job, but also the value of my college degree and the American identity I once possessed as a child.

This is my first time in Washington, DC, and the privilege of being able to speak today truly exemplifies the minimal state I always feel like I'm in. I am lucky because I do have a government ID that allowed me to board the plane here to share my story and give to the thousands of other undocumented students who cannot. But I know that when I return home tonight, I'll become marginalized once again. At the moment, I can't work legally even though I do have some legal status. I also know that the job I'm going to look for when I get back isn't the one I'll want to have. The job I'll want, because it makes use of my college degree, will be out of my hands. Without the DREAM Act, I have no prospect of becoming what I've always considered myself to be—an American.

But for some of my friends, who could only be here today through a blurred face in a video, they have other fears too. They can't be here because they are afraid of being deported from the country they grew up in and call home. There is also the fear of the unknown after graduation, a fear that is uniquely different from other students. Graduation for many of my friends isn't a right of passage to becoming a responsible adult. Rather it is the last phase in which they can feel a sense of belonging as an American. As an American university student, my friends feel a part of an American community—where they are living out the American dream among their peers. But after graduation, they will be left behind by their American friends, as my friends are without the prospect of obtaining jobs that will utilize the degrees they've earned; my friends will become just undocumented immigrants.



Antonio's first home in America. *Photograph by Jessica Chou.*

My Secret Identity

My Secret Identity once consumed and tortured
every ounce of my being.

Like in the prisons of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay,
My secret identity was humiliated, ravaged, and beaten.

My secret identity was imprisoned and forced to
gruesomely watch its own raping.
Its own destruction.

My secret identity became a target for hatred.
It became a monstrous alien, something subhuman,
something that could be disposed of.

Unarmed and unprepared to protect myself as a child,
I was forced to watch as my secret identity sustained
blow after blow after blow.

I wanted to defend it but I could not.
I did not know how, I did not know what to do, what to say.

I wanted to scream and yell at the images and headlines in the
media to stop!
My secret identity was not a Criminal! It was not illegal!

As I grew and entered high school my secret identity was
mentally terrorized, psychologically tormented,
emotionally terrified, linguistically attacked

And to my soul ...

Hope was loss,
Hope was shackled in chains,
Hope was destroyed,
Hope was murdered,
Hope was oppressed,
Hope was not a word,
Hope did not exist ...

Today education and concientizacion have begun
to heal my secret identity.
To nurture it, to rebuild it, to restore it from the
mental damage of annihilative attacks.

The lacerations are closing, but the invisible scars are still there.
Recovery is near but the revolution to free my
secret identity still wages on.

Uniting with other fellow revolutionaries and their secret identities,
We vociferously march in collective numbers,
to liberate ourselves from hopelessness.

My secret identity will no longer be a secret or
source of imprisonment.
Equipped with a revolutionary mind and a relentless
commitment of self-sacrifice for La Causa
Today to my soul ...

Hope is not lost,
Hope is found,
Hope is not in chains,
Hope is shattering chains,
Hope does exist,
Hope is alive and breathing,
Hope is a word by which inner strength flows out of me.
Hope is what feeds the compassion in my life to change society.

walking across the stage

Veronica Valdez

Veronica, a recent graduate of UCLA, reflects on her experience as an undocumented student and the uncertainty her future holds. Although this is a real account of an undocumented student's life, a pseudonym has been used to protect the identity of the author.

I bought my graduation robe three weeks before I graduated from UCLA. As I paid for my robe, I reminisced about how far I had come in my endeavors to succeed. Yet I could focus only on the fact that my life was now more uncertain than ever. My undocumented status has left me in a marginalized state where, even as a college graduate, the direction of my life is in limbo. I have achieved one component of the American dream: a great education. Nevertheless, I am left without opportunities for jobs in which I can use my degree—a degree that took all my perseverance to achieve, following a path that began over eighteen years ago.

My parents' decision to come to the United States in the late 1980s forever changed their lives as well as mine. From the point of our arrival as undocumented immigrants—my mother as a twenty-one-year-old and me as a four-year-old—our lives have been full of struggle and uncertainty.

It was an early Thursday morning when my mother and I got on the road to leave Mexico for the United States. My mother took only what she believed was necessary. We were headed to the border, specifically to Tijuana, where we would meet a friend of my father's who would get us across the U.S.-Mexico border. When we finally arrived in Los Angeles, my mother was relieved to finally be with my father. I do not remember reuniting with my father or crossing the border, but my mother said that I was very happy. I had cried a lot when my father first left.

My mother gave birth to my younger sister in 1991 and with a new child in the home, the need for more money became a pressing issue. My mother did not have a lot of work experience in Mexico; she worked only one job before coming to America. At the age of thirteen, her parents took her out of school and put her to work so that she could contribute to her family's household income. She worked in a restaurant until she was sixteen, and then she left her job after she met my father. She was married and had a child by the age of seventeen.

It was very complicated for my mother to find a job in the United States because of her undocumented status, which prevented her from just applying at any business with a "Help Wanted" sign. Additionally she did

It was very hard to **realize** that even though I felt like a young **American** and had been educated entirely in this nation, my **immigration** status **limited** my options and ultimately how I could live my **life**.

not know English and was unsure of where to go to learn English. She found her first jobs through friends in our apartment building and at the parent center at my elementary school. My mother's first jobs were in sales—from Mary Kay to Avon and then to Tupperware—my mom sold it all. Eventually she met a woman who worked with an agency that places workers in factories. Since 1997 my mother has worked in factories, ranging from clothing factories to packaging factories. In her current job, she packs beauty products into boxes. My mother wakes up every morning at 5:30 to go to her job in the packaging factory. Since she cannot legally get a license in the state of California, my mother takes the bus. She is too scared of being pulled over and possibly going to jail or even being deported, to drive.

For my mother, the concept of working has always been something you have to do, as opposed to an opportunity to make a difference in the world or to find fulfillment. Every day my mother comes home from work exhausted, wondering whether she will have her job the next day. She has no health benefits. Being undocumented has definitely made her position in the workforce an uncertain, frightening place to be. She has changed jobs several times because the factories have closed down, and she was advised at certain locations not to come in to work or to leave early because immigration services were going to come. Seeing my mother go through these experiences and feeling her fear of the workplace has been a major push for me to attain my college degree.

My history in the United States began at the age of four when I was brought across the border. It has been full of both difficulties and joy. Throughout my childhood and now as an adult, I have considered the United States my home. My K-12 education was in the Los Angeles public schools. Despite the fact that I have lived in this country almost all my life, legalization has not been possible because of the complete lack of immigration legislation that addresses the needs of people like myself.

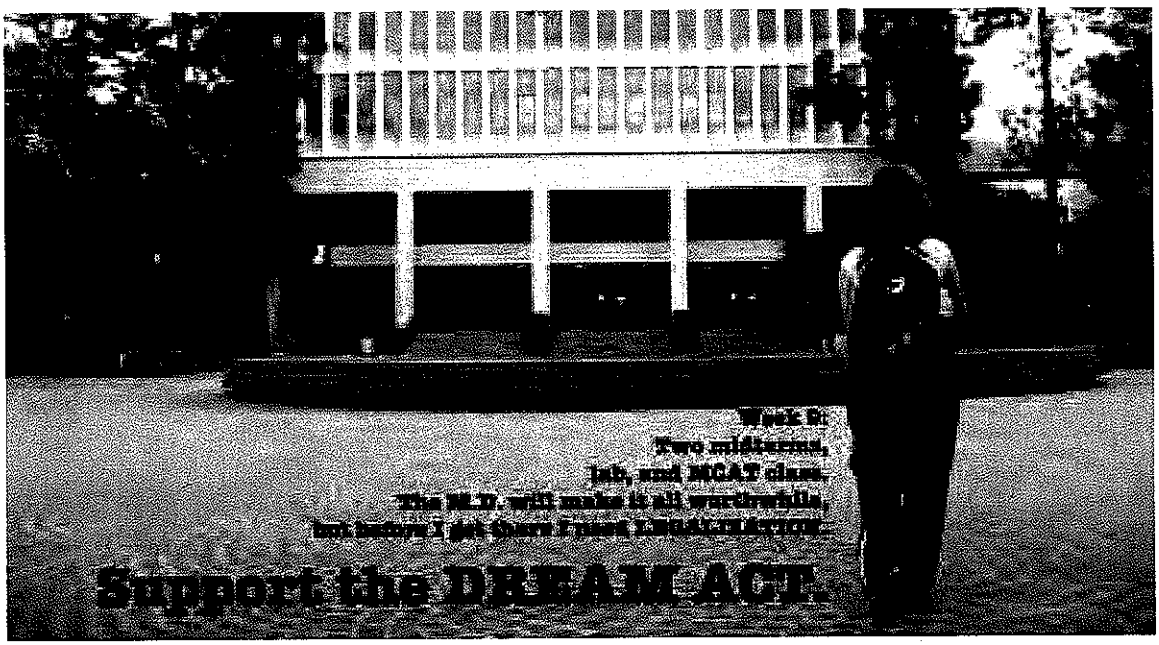
Growing up I did not have any friends who were undocumented, and I was unaware of my immigration status until I was fifteen. When I was fifteen, I decided it was time to get a job because my parents did not have a lot of money, and I wanted to buy things for myself. It was at this time that my parents notified me that I could not get a job because I had not been born in this country. From that point on, my view of what my life would be like completely changed. This knowledge made it very difficult for me to face the real world. My work experiences have varied, but most have been "under the table." I got my first job in a bakery when I was eighteen. It

was the worst job I ever had. They paid me below the minimum wage, and I did not have any benefits. The work at the bakery was very hard. Being the cashier was the least of my worries; I also washed dishes, mopped the floor, cleaned the bathroom, baked the bread. I worked long hours. I had to wake up every morning before sunrise to work, and then I attended class late at night, only to come home to do class assignments. I worked very hard in school and earned good grades, but I felt humiliated. I had always had aspirations of becoming a professor, not mopping floors for low wages. I only worked at the bakery for a month before I quit. It was very hard to realize that even though I felt like a young American and had been educated entirely in this nation, my immigration status limited my options and ultimately how I could live my life.

My second job was as a waitress in a Mexican restaurant, where I worked for almost two years. At that restaurant I earned the money I needed to pay my college tuition. I worked full-time, six days a week, and simultaneously maintained my status as a full-time student. As my college education progressed, it became too difficult to hold a full-time job and maintain high grades, so I left my job. From that moment on, I have been earning money from jobs such as babysitting, washing dogs, and transcribing. I grew up seeing how hard my parents worked for the few things they have, and I wanted a better life for me and for them.

My immigration status has been a huge factor in my life in the United States. It has brought many challenges, including the inability to obtain financial aid, grants, or scholarships, to receive a valid state-issued ID or license, or to have job opportunities that match my educational level. These obstacles have contributed to my family's life of poverty. The feeling of constant uncertainty has affected me, yet I have overcome almost all the obstacles that have come my way. I learned the English language, and I have helped my family. I have paid for my college tuition, and I am obtaining the education I always desired at the university of my dreams, UCLA.

My mother has also overcome many of the challenges she has faced in the United



Veronica in a campaign poster. *By Andrew Laming.*

States. She attended English classes that were offered in the middle school I attended, and she bought tapes and videos to improve her English language skills. She found a job that has provided steady income for the last ten years. My mother has matured and given her children the motivation and advice necessary for them to succeed.

We have not been able to change our undocumented status even though we arrived in this country almost eighteen years ago. The Dream Act would allow me to change my undocumented status, opening up a path that would lead to citizenship. As beneficial as the Dream Act would be for undocumented students, we need comprehensive immigration reform that will change the legal status of millions of U.S. residents.

When I asked my mother if she would have done anything differently in terms of coming to America, she said, "Yes, I would have tried to enter the country legally, to try to find the opportunity to come legally." When I asked why she did not try to enter the country legally from the beginning, she said, "Because when the people go from here to over there, they tell you that here you earn a lot of money, that it is very easy, and they tell you of a country that is very pretty and different than what it really is. And because I did not think. I was young and did not have the maturity. I did not even know what to expect. Simply, I followed your father." I believe my mother's experience mirrors the experiences of many immigrants who have come to the United States, led by the fairy tales that exist about the country. Unfortunately many immigrants have realized that these stories are only fantasies.

My mother has not seen her mother or much of the rest of her family in almost eighteen years. With no legal way of leaving and then reentering the country, traveling to Mexico has been out of the question for years. My mother never thought she would live and raise her children in California Yet going to live once more in Mexico is not a possibility. She feels her home is where her children are, and her children consider the United States their home. My mother and I, and many other undocumented immigrants, have faced challenges every day in our attempt to create a better life for our families.

I consider myself American. My friends, boyfriend, family, hopes, and dreams are in this country. Thus, I work in every way I can, in every movement I can, to be recognized by the nation I have lived in for so long.

I Run. *By Laura Marcela.*

I run and run, it doesn't wait for me, late to class I guess.

I turn around and I see a woman waiting, her beautiful brown skin radiates in the sun, she reminds me of my mother.

Her thick navy blue sweater warms her, and she is now ready to face her day as a commodity. She will go to a wonderful mansion in the hills of Beverly to take care of children that are not her own.

Her children go to school in some of the most underprivileged schools in the L.A. area, they come home to an empty house, no parents allowed in the home 'til the immigrant working quota has been met, 'til they have done their service to a country who labels them as aliens.

The woman looks at me, her eyes look tired and sad, but there is something in them that shows perseverance and strength, the perseverance to continue the struggle of the minority masses, the strength to leave her children behind and raise the children of the privileged, the perseverance to stand strong and face her daily chores at the hands of the elite, the strength to survive for her family's future.

But will this perseverance and strength be sufficient?
Will her dreams of having college-educated children come true?
Or will these dreams be crushed by the same country she so strongly believes will provide better opportunities, a country who turns the other cheek and ignores the children of immigrants, a country who does not listen to the urgent call for resources and aid for students everywhere, who will tell her that her struggles will be fruitless, who will dim the light of her hope?

The bus arrives, I find a seat in the back and think, maybe late to class is not so bad.

I am a UCLA graduate with a BA in sociology and anthropology, interested in pursuing a career in cultural anthropology. Due to financial circumstances and legal status, I needed to commute to UCLA using public transportation. On my trips to and from campus, I would encounter different people in the bus. I was especially captivated by the women who where going to work from impoverished neighborhoods in East L.A. to West L.A. These women inspired me to write the spoken-word piece. As an AB 540 student, I not only experienced first-hand the struggles of being an immigrant but I have seen it in the eyes of the Latino community that surrounds me. May the struggle and the resilience of our people continue to grow.