



“To connect and empower immigrants with resources to achieve legal documentation, fulfill their economic needs, and integrate into the community.”

DACA Small Step Forward for Local Youth

Written by Tomas Nolasco

Imagine a world where you grew up no different from your peers. You went to the same school and did the same assignments. You even lived a similar social life, being from the same place and all. As you grew up, you were so full of life; ambitious in a future you had worked hard to achieve. As everyone else walked onto the stage to receive their high school diploma, you began to feel uneasy. Your palms began to sweat. The best day in the lives of others was a frightening day in yours. Yes, you worked just as hard as them and do deserve it, yet it means nothing. This was the day you would be let out into a world that no matter how bad you wanted to, no matter how hard you tried, you would be denied the benefits to work for your dreams. If this is hard to imagine, than you are one of the lucky ones.

Being undocumented is a lifestyle not many are aware of. People even go as far as to mock it, but to me it is life. As I went through school, I began to feel helpless and even feared graduating. I would not be able to hold any sort of job. Not because I'm incompetent or lazy, but because I was not born on this land. I was brought here when I was less than two years of age. I had not even begun creating memories, yet my downfall was already set. My

parents brought me here to give me opportunities they never had. I did not want to let them down.

I held petty jobs here and there, getting paid a wage less than the minimum "under the table". I realized others like taking advantage of people like me for their own benefit. During the summer leading to my senior high school year I worked on a farm picking canola in order to raise money to pay for school clothes and supplies, since my parents could not afford it. I have three other siblings they had to worry about too. Working under these hellish conditions beneath the scorching sun from 6:00 AM to 3:00 PM on a daily basis was dreadful. Rainy days were always a blessing. A high schooler should not be working like this, but I considered myself fortunate because it was better than nothing.

As I finally graduated, my parents managed to raise enough money for me to receive DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals). It is a step above what I formerly had. I can finally hold a normal job! But nothing more. I am still unable to go to college due to my inability to receive financial aid, which was the only way I could have gone. On my FAFSA, my EFC number returned a zero. I was going to get the full amount the government could grant me, but be-

cause I have no permanent residency nor a certificate of naturalization, as required by federal law in order to receive federal aid, Adams State University (the school I planned to attend) could not grant it to me. All federal aid along with all other scholarships I had been awarded for my efforts while in high school were taken away from me for the same reason. I began taking college classes as early as my sophomore year. At times as I grew up, we would have no food on the table. The bills would become too great. I grew up having no TV or cable to watch, so learning became my interest; it always has been.

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DACA Recipient Tomas Nolasco

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Driver's Licenses for All?

In an exciting development in immigrant rights, Colorado Governor John Hickenlooper signed SB251 into law on June 5, 2013. SB251, otherwise known as the Colorado Road and Community Safety Act, gives everyone in Colorado (regardless of immigration status) the right to a driver's license.

Eleven states and Washington D.C. have now implemented similar laws.

As implied by the name, this will also make Colorado roads and communities safer by decreasing the number of people on the roads who have not passed a driving test. More importantly, the ability to drive legally gives undocumented people a means of transportation without fear. A minor traffic violation no longer needs to mean possible deportation.

Although this is obviously an

exciting step forward, it has also come with its challenges. The law was enacted on August 1, 2014, which was the first date undocumented could obtain these licenses. There have been many implementation issues however.



Although there are around 200,000 undocumented immigrants in the state, there are only five driver's license offices able to give out these licenses. This could amount to a wait time for some of around seven years.

Those who have managed to get appointments already are the lucky few. In order to schedule an appointment,

one can either call in or schedule it online. However appointments can only be scheduled three months in advance, and one new day of appointment slots opens up each day for scheduling. These slots automatically appear online at midnight each business day, and fill

up within the first minute they appear. In order to get one, you must consistently be awake and on the site at midnight, and even then it could take weeks of trying to get through. Beyond the fact that the site is incredibly hard to access at this time due to the massive traffic every night at midnight, this system has also left anyone without access to a computer and internet at midnight out of luck.

We hope that in the future Colorado will consider opening more offices for this so that we can truly have "Driver's Licenses for all".

DACA Story (cont.)

"People like me have dreams too."

College was my dream that I worked hard for, but right then and there, as I attempted to register for the University, it was taken away.

My classmates would have never guessed my struggles. In school, I was known as "that smart kid" who was supposed to go to college and become successful. The latter will still become true. I want to be successful so I could take my family away from the poverty we have always lived in. Thanks to the help of the Immigration Resource Center, I can work now, at least for the next

year and a half until my work permit expires. I plan to take full advantage of this little window of opportunity I hold. I hope that those who create these rules will realize one day that working is not enough. People like me have dreams too. College would have been great to attend. It would have made my parents so proud to see their child continue his education! What more can a parent ask for but to see their children succeed in life?

Perhaps one day these flaws in the system will be realized and changes will be

made. This is supposed to be the land of opportunity and equality for all, but we as a nation are still far from perfect. I hate to think there are others like me who have no voice and their struggles are unknown, even greater than mine. This has been my struggle so far. If you were to see me on the streets or out in public, you would never guess the hardships I have experienced. You wouldn't because I'm not much different. I speak, think, and work, just as long and just as hard, as you do.

VAWA Gives Woman a Voice

Under the Violence Against Women Act immigration provisions, immigrant victims/survivors of domestic violence, child abuse or elder abuse may apply for lawful permanent resident status without the cooperation and knowledge of the abusive spouse, parent or adult child. It allows the victim/survivor to file the self-petition confidentially without having to leave the abuser at the time of submitting it and allowing her/him to leave the abuser once the legal permanent status has been acquired. While waiting for the process for adjustment of status, the applicant receives employment authorization and access to benefits. VAWA self-petitions provide domestic violence survivors with the resources that are crucial to escaping violence and beginning to live safely and independently. The SLVIRC's Por Ti Mismo program has been assisting immigrant victims and survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault and other crimes file applications for VAWA self-petitions and U Nonimmigrant Visas since 2001.

Esmeralda came to the center in November of 2013. She had just divorced her abusive spouse and was hesitant to come to our office and talk about her im-

migration status. It was determined that she could "self petition" under VAWA, and we have worked with her ever since. Esmeralda had experienced domestic violence from a previous spouse who also sexually abused her daughter. When she met Chad, she thought things were going to be different. At the beginning of their relationship, Esmeralda was very cautious and did not want to experience abuse again, but Chad won her with his charm. The abuse and drinking started a year after their marriage. He would come home drunk and verbally and physically abuse Esmeralda. Their marriage lasted almost eight years and even though they had two children, Chad never stopped drinking, using drugs and abusing Esmeralda. Two months after filing her application, Esmeralda received an employment authorization card that changed her life forever. Now she is able to support herself and her three children without having to rely on her abusive ex-spouse for child support or any other resources.

On one occasion when he was supposed to pick up their children, Esmeralda's cell phone had been dis-



OCTOBER IS
NATIONAL DOMESTIC VIOLENCE
AWARENESS MONTH

connected. She was one day late paying the bill. The abuser was very upset that he could not get a hold of Esmeralda and when he came to the house, he verbally harassed her and began yelling and screaming. For the first time in almost nine years, after looking at her employment authorization card, Esmeralda was able to stand up to him and tell him that if he had paid her child support, she would not have her phone disconnected. That moment was a victory for Esmeralda. She felt empowered to have a voice and finally fight back. She is still waiting for her adjustment of status, but being able to work legally in this country has changed her life and has given her hope for a better future free of violence and fear of deportation, living a happy life with her three children.

**Names have been changed to protect client's confidentiality.*

"She felt empowered to have a voice and finally fight back."

Volunteer Serves at IRC for Two Years

The IRC has periodically had volunteers, both short term and long term, over its entire history. Many of the long term volunteers the IRC has been fortunate enough to have come for an entire year or two have been through Mennonite Voluntary Service. There has been an active MVS unit in the valley for around 30 years now with volunteers working at a variety of non profits in Alamosa and the surrounding area. One of these volunteers completed a two-year term with the IRC this past August.

Roxanne Reimer came to Alamosa with Mennonite Voluntary Service in August of 2012 for the express purpose of working with the IRC. As someone passionate about immigration and

other social justice issues, as well as speaking fluent Spanish, Roxanne fit right in and was able to make a large contribution to the IRC.

Over the past two years Roxanne has coordinated the Punto de Vista Education and Outreach program. She headed up the adult ESL program, helped coordinate the tutoring program at Tierra Nueva for immigrant children, and on occasion taught Spanish classes to community members. Aside from these tasks she was a large help in the office completing necessary translations and assisting clients with other needs.

Roxanne left to begin graduate school in Boulder



Roxanne with one of her clients and their family

this past August. She will be missed greatly, however her leaving has also opened up many wonderful volunteer opportunities including tutoring ESL and helping with the after school tutoring program. So if you are interested in volunteering with us (whether 1 hour a week or 20) please give us a call or stop by the office!

“her leaving has also opened up many wonderful volunteer opportunities”

IRC in the Running for Grant from Colorado Trust

This past February executive director, Flora Aruchleta, had the insight to apply for a health equity grant from The Colorado Trust. As an organization with a great relationship with a both rural and marginalized population, the IRC seems like a wonderful intermediary in order to work towards health equity.

Immigrants by and large have less access to health care than the average American for many reasons. Some of those reasons are on a policy level, however some are things which can be combated in our own community. As such, the IRC considers this potential project as central

to their mission to “Connect and empower immigrants with resources to achieve legal documentation, fulfill their economic needs, and integrate into the community.”

A few months ago, Flora received notification that the IRC had in fact been chosen to move forward in the selection process. Since then IRC staff has been participating in a process to better discern how the project will move forward and what it will look like.

If chosen for the full grant, the IRC will be able to hire a new employee in order to



THE
COLORADO
TRUST

A Health Equity Foundation

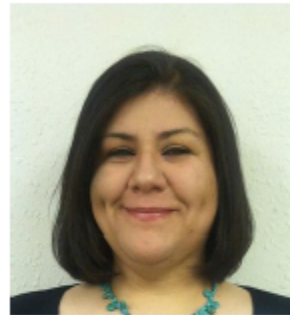
focus on health equity in the immigrant community of the valley using a promotora model. The IRC is very excited about the proposition of moving forward on this issue and looks forward to the final grant decision.

Want to help support the mission of the IRC? Go to www.slvirc.com and click on the Donate online link or drop by our office!

Staff Reflection - Carmen Stevens, Immigrant Advocate

My father crossed the border to work in the United States when I was two years old in search of a better life for my family. Later, when I was ten, my father was able to petition for my family and me to come from Mexico to the United States. As a child, I remember watching the news and seeing all the undocumented immigrants who were taken advantage of by unscrupulous individuals acting as lawyers. This made me very upset and instilled a dream in me of one day helping immigrants obtain legal status while treating them with dignity and respect.

I've always wanted to practice immigration law to help families like my own and see my current position as the Immigrant Advocate as the perfect opportunity for me to serve our



Carmen Stevens- Immigrant Advocate at the IRC

immigrant community. I started working at the SLVIRC in June of 2013 assisting immigrant victims/survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault and other crimes apply for immigration relief under the Violence Against Women Act immigration remedies. Working with people who have been victimized and experienced trauma is a demanding job, but I am very grateful to be able to provide these services to them. The SLVIRC is such a vital resource for the entire San Luis Valley and beyond that I cannot imagine not having it.

The San Luis Valley Immigrant Resource Center (SLVIRC) is a unique organization and has a long history of working with immigrants. It has been an informal resource center for immigrants in the area since 1987. One of several programs created by San Luis Valley Christian Community Services, the Immigrant Assistance Program grew out of low-income immigrants' need for assistance in filling out essential applications for political asylum, amnesty, and other legal status. In February 2003, the San Luis Valley Immigrant Resource Center received 501 (c) (3) status with the Internal Revenue Service, and is currently an independent non-profit located in Alamosa, Colorado, serving the entire San Luis Valley and beyond.

SLVIRC serves a geographically remote area in south-central Colorado, which is roughly the size of Connecticut. The area is home to more than 40,000 residents and 10,000 migrant and seasonal workers. The population is almost 50% Hispanic, and there are more than 400 Q'anjob'al Indigenous Mayan (Guatemalans) living in the San Luis Valley. It is one of Colorado's poorest regions, with much of the population living below the poverty level. Two of the valley's six counties are the poorest in the state and among the poorest in the nation. The majority of the clientele served are of Mexican or Guatemalan descent.

The IRC currently has three programs working towards our mission. The first continues to be Immigration Legal Assistance which assists immigrants in completing essential immigration paperwork. The second is Por ti Misma through which the IRC assists battered immigrants and crime victims in achieving legal status. The third program of the IRC is Punto de Vista, which provides English tutoring to immigrants, Spanish courses to community service providers, and an after school tutoring program for immigrant children.



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