

marie nazareth gonzález
a voice for the voiceless

On the verge of being deported, she became the public face for passage of the Dream Act.

When she was 5, Marie Nazareth González and her family left Heredia, Costa Rica, and headed to the United States, traveling legally on visitor's visas. After settling in Jefferson City, Missouri, Marie saw her life unfold along a familiar immigrant plotline: Her parents became entrepreneurs, opening a Chinese restaurant in Jefferson City, where they "worked hard and paid taxes," Marie says. Meanwhile, she went on to become an honors student at Helias High School, working toward her goal of making her family proud by going to college and one day becoming an international corporate lawyer.

And then, in May 2002, this all-American fantasy was shattered. One day Marie was just another 16-year-old applying for her driver's permit; the next, she and her family were being told they had overstayed their visitor's visas and were going to be deported. "All of a sudden," Marie says, "everything I had ever dreamed of was uncertain."

It is a shocking story that Marie, now 18, spent most of this year sharing with anyone who would listen, in hopes of persuading Congress to pass the Dream Act—a piece of legislation that would give permanent residency to some undocumented students. The requirements: A student would have to have lived in the United States for more than five years, under the age of 16 at the time of entry, and completed at least two years of college, trade school, or military service. The Dream Act would protect Marie and at least some of the 65,000 other undocumented *estudiantes* who came to the United States as very young children—and then grew up here with no say about their situation, learning English, preparing for college—from deportation to a country they know only from their parents' stories.

As one of just a few undocumented students to speak publicly about her situation, "Marie has put a human face to the Dream Act," says Maricela Donahue, community organizer for the nonprofit Center for Community Change in Washington, D.C. "Other kids are angry, frustrated, or give up, but Marie has so much hope in her." Perhaps that's because she feels she has no other choice. When Marie and her parents arrived in 1991, they did so legally, on six-month visitor's visas. Shortly after the visas expired, the family went to a lawyer's office to apply for permanent residency—and were mistakenly told, Marie explains, that they had to let 10 years pass before applying for their citizenship but could stay in the country. After 10 years, the family tried once again to start the application process for their citizenship but were advised to wait because of the recent September 11 attacks.

Because the family had already received valid Social Security numbers, they felt secure that they were in the country legally. Then Marie went to get a driver's permit at the local Department of Motor Vehicles, where she presented her foreign birth certificate as proof of age—and was asked about her legal status. Marie was shocked.

"What have I done to deserve deportation to a country I barely know?" Marie Nazareth González asked the crowd that gathered in front of the White House to support the Dream Act.



"We never thought we were undocumented," she says.

What happened next is not entirely clear, but Marie believes that someone from the DMV tipped off government officials, who conducted a background check on the family and found that their visas had expired long ago. In the two years since, the Gonzálezes have battled the deportation process in court, all the while struggling to pay the bills because Marie's father, who had been working as a courier since selling the family business a few years ago, is legally barred from holding a job. "We are getting by, but it's been tough," says Marie, adding that it is only thanks to a savings account funded by their friends and neighbors that they aren't homeless.

Ironically, although Marie has spoken about the Dream Act before the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and at an April rally in front of the White House, she may never reap the rewards of her bold actions: At press time, the Dream Act was still waiting to be brought before the Senate for a vote, and the González family was waiting for a court ruling on their final appeal, which could take as long as two years. If Marie is sent back to Costa Rica, she will be refused entry to the United States—the only home she has ever known—for 10 years. "We love this country," Marie says, "and we want to give back to it." —*Lixandra Urresta*

Marie Nazareth González, costarricense de 18 años de edad, llegó a Estados Unidos con su familia en 1991 cuando tenía 5 años con una visa de visitante. La familia se asentó en Jefferson City, Missouri, donde abrieron un restaurante chino. Marie se crió allí y llegó a ser estudiante modelo en la Helias High School. Un abogado les había informado erróneamente que las visas que tenían serían válidas por 10 años. Pero en mayo del 2002, después de que Marie fue a solicitar su permiso para conducir, le dijeron que su visa había expirado y que todos serían deportados. Todo este año, Marie se ha dedicado a promover el Dream Act, un proyecto de ley que daría residencia permanente a estudiantes indocumentados que han vivido en Estados Unidos más de cinco años y que entraron al país antes de los 16 años de edad. "Nunca pensamos que éramos indocumentados", dice Marie, quien ha dado discursos frente a la Casa Blanca y ante la U.S. Chamber of Commerce. El padre de Marie, que había vendido su negocio años atrás, ahora no tiene trabajo ya que legalmente no puede ser empleado. Gracias a una cuenta de ahorros establecida por sus vecinos y amigos no han quedado desamparados. "Nos las arreglamos más o menos, pero es difícil", dice Marie. En estos momentos el proyecto de ley sigue en espera de ser presentado ante el Senado y la familia González aguarda una decisión de los tribunales sobre su deportación. Irónicamente, si deportan la familia, no podrán regresar a Estados Unidos por 10 años.

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