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Stories from the Border of Trump's America

By Katie Biddle, Staff Writer

We're sitting in Metro, the bustle of students surrounding us, two untouched plates of food sitting on the table. Sitting across that table is Jorge Carreño, a junior Graphic Communications major, looking like any other Cal Poly student with a smile and green sweatshirt. His easy and happy demeanor, however, is misleading for someone who has fought so hard to get to this very table -- Jorge is currently an undocumented immigrant who has experienced countless hardships in all aspects of his life, struggling at times to stay afloat, do well in school, and succeed in a nation that was once a golden place of opportunity and now fights him with every step.

According to campus sources, there is approximately a hundred undocumented students at Cal Poly. For Jorge and these students, the coming years under Donald Trump leave many troubled and scared of what the new year may bring.

According to the University of Texas, there are around a million such citizens in the United States. Jorge is one of many, and his story gives a voice to those too afraid to speak out:

Jorge Carreño was born during the summer of 1993 in the northern state of Coahuila, Mexico. His parents, who prefer to remain unnamed, had both previously lived in the United States as seasonal undocumented immigrant workers before they met each other. In order to provide a more promising and secure future for Jorge and his brother, they made the decision to leave Mexico permanently and establish a new life in the States. At only 3 years old, Jorge and his older brother were separated from their parents in order to cross the border safely. While his parents took the treacherous journey by foot, Jorge and his brother entered the U.S. with the identities of two legal children. After reuniting in Anaheim, CA, the family moved and settled north where they continued to live for nearly two decades. Growing up, Jorge was aware of his status but didn't allow it to define him.

"A lot of my friends in high school were legal citizens. And they would poke fun at it, and I would laugh it off."

Immigrants choose to enter the country illegally for many reasons, but nearly all of them cite an outdated system as central to their reasoning: the United States only grants citizenship, permanent or temporary, for humanitarian, familial reunification and employment reasons. Those applying for citizenship are picked through a lottery and the numbers that are allowed in are highly regulated. It costs

approximately \$400 to become a citizen, money that many don't have, and basic knowledge of the history of a country that is completely foreign to many applicants who are simply hoping for a better life. It's understandable why quick feet under the cover of night are more efficient and effective. Many children are brought in with their parent this way -- they have no choice but to follow, and hence grow up in a foreign nation.

And so Jorge grew up. When he reached working age, he acquired a fake ID and Social Security number -- something widely available -- and an ITN, an Individual Taxation Identification Number, a form that the undocumented can use to do their taxes and began to apply for jobs. He encountered initial failures because of suspicions of his status, but found success at a small local shop selling groceries. Now that work was taken care of, Jorge turned to his next concern: obtaining a legal social security number and safety. While working 32 hours a week and attending school, Jorge studied to understand the legal process of obtaining a DACA - a deferred action application for temporary California citizenship.

The DACA was first introduced in 2012 by the Obama administration, and was issued through an executive action. Obtaining a DACA is a months-long process, one with multiple qualifications: the applicant must have been under the age of 31 as of June 15, 2012, entered the States before their 16th birthday, and be a current residence in the U.S. since June of 2007. Once they meet these guidelines, applicants must collect five different forms of identification to prove these qualifications true, some that may be quite difficult to obtain or keep track of in the passing years. The application and process also costs a \$465 application fee plus \$500 fee for an attorney. A third of all DACA residents live in California, and Jorge is one of them. Jorge attended workshops in his hometown in order to understand the legal jargon and push his application through quicker. His brother wasn't so lucky -- his took four months to process. Jorge is currently in his second year of his most recent renewal, and will apply again, assuming it's still in place, in November of 2017.

In addition to being able to stay in the country, Jorge and many other undocumented students are able to go to college and pay in-state tuition thanks to Assembly Bill 540, the DREAM Act, and DREAM scholarships. The scholarships are named after the act, short for acronym for Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors, which would allow child-immigrants a chance for permanent citizenship proposed by the Obama administration in 2012. The bill failed to pass the Senate, and has not since. A group of four, consisting of Pulitzer-prize winning journalist Amanda Bennet, former Secretary of Commerce Carlos Gutierrez, Grahams Holding Company Chairman Don Graham, and Chairman and Chief Creative Officer of Muñoz & Company Henry R. Muñoz III founded the organization called The Dream for undocumented students to fund education after the act didn't pass. The organization is funded through thousands of benefactors, who have allowed currently 1700 students to attend and graduate from over 25 partner schools in the U.S., including Cal Poly.

The fear aspect of DACA and DREAM scholarships are in the ability of its renewal. While the DREAM scholarships are independent of government funding and control, if there aren't any students legally able to go to school, then it will become obsolete. A four-year-old policy in its infancy may be one of the first things to go in the beginning of Donald Trump's administration, according to his promises to overrule Obama's 2012 executive order and deport 2 million of the undocumented as one of his first actions in office. Trump also claims to have plans to double the number of Immigration and Customs agents, costing over \$1 billion per year in increased costs and adding to the already intense atmosphere of fear in the undocumented community.

“It’s hard to be confident... especially because that was some of his rhetoric while he was campaigning. It’s hard to know what things will be. DACA has never faced a change in presidency, because it’s new, and if DACA were to be cancelled...there has definitely been a rise in the number of students I’ve talked to since the election,” says Casey McCullough, an Americorps VISTA worker at Cal Poly solely dedicated to supporting undocumented students.

Traditionally, the only places safe from these agents were churches, hospitals, and schools. While the Hunchback of Notre Dame-esque concept of sanctuary may seem extreme to some, they are some of the only safe public spaces for undocumented students not wanting to be dragged from a life that has been theirs often since infancy. Being one of the DREAM schools, Cal Poly is very careful to be legal but still show unwavering support for its undocumented students. After the November election, Cal Poly’s Deans released an emailed letter to all students, stating:

“It is important for you to know that we support you. While I do not know all of the answers, I would welcome the opportunity to speak with you and connect you, as appropriate and desired by you, with specific college and campus resources, such as the CLA Advising Team. The same is true for my associate deans. We are committed to helping all our students, and we are here for you. In conclusion, know that the college remains fully dedicated to the principles that inform our commitment to inclusivity, diversity, and justice/fairness. “

Two days later, a letter came from Cal Poly’s President’s Office, written by Chancellor Timothy White, stating:

“My immediate concern is for our students and other members of our campus community who lack documentation and fear actions based on the emerging national narrative of potential changes in immigration policy and related enforcement action...The CSU *will not* enter into agreements with state or local law enforcement agencies, Homeland Security or any other federal department for the enforcement of federal immigration law; Our university police departments *will not* honor immigration hold requests; and Our university police *do not* contact, detain, question or arrest individuals solely on the basis of being – *or suspected of being* – a person that lacks documentation. We are also partnering with elected officials at the state and national level to inform and work to prevent negative developments regarding immigration for our undocumented students, including those with DACA status.”

The university cannot declare itself an official ‘sanctuary campus’ without possibly putting government funds in danger, but the reassurance that Cal Poly will fight for them was comforting to many students.

In addition to the show of support following the election, Cal Poly has also for years supported undocumented students, with services that will continue no matter the ultimate outcome of the election. These services include the ability to meet with McCullough, the Undocumented Student Working group, the LSAMP program designed to support undergraduate students who face social, educational, and/or economic barriers to careers in STEM fields, administrator and faculty training in how to best support undocumented students, and events such as November 10th’s Coming Out Day event, organized to show support and empower undocumented students.

The rally also commenced with an announcement that gladdened many Cal Poly students: in 2017, Cal Poly will open an Undocumented Support Center in the Hillcrest building. Students and faculty have requested and are currently working on designs and services, including lawyers, undocumented and employed alumni meetings, counseling, and financial aid.

“I think it’ll be so wonderful, and a very valuable resource for the students here who are all so wonderful and bright,” said Jane Lehr, one of the organizers of the Coming Out Rally and lead member of the Undocumented Student Working group, tears in her eyes as she spoke of the hardships her students face. “It will help so many.”

When I mentioned these services and groups, Jorge’s face lit up - in his past school, he had actually created a logo for their Undocumented center, and while he hasn’t gotten involved directly in the groups mentioned, he thinks that they’re “wonderful.”

When asked about the future, Jorge showed no fear, instead urging the unification of all Americans:

“A house divided cannot stand. Now is the time for communication, for listening. Few people actually listen - do we continue building a divide, or do we discuss it?”

So while fear is still the prevailing emotion among many of the documented and undocumented, Jorge is an inspiration to all feeling fear: instead, stand up and fight. Cal Poly will stand with all students, and if any would like to share their concerns with someone, it is important to note that the Health Center has counseling services for all students. In the wise words of Jorge Carreño:

“This nation is greater than one man.”