

Immigrants welcome relief from deportation

San Jose Mercury News (California)

July 4, 2012 Wednesday

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Section: NEWS

Length: 888 words

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Body

Grecia Neves of San Jose was scanning the morning news online while chatting on the phone with her husband. Suddenly an item leapt out at her: President Barack Obama was changing federal policy -- a change that would protect her from deportation, a fear she's had since she was 12 years old.

"I was so emotional," she said. "My voice was almost gone from crying and screaming."

On June 15, the president announced a new policy to protect undocumented students from deportation and grant two-year renewable work permits. Across the country, his executive order spawned sighs of relief and shouts of joy from the nearly 800,000 young people like Neves.

Neves, 23, who asked her real name not be used to protect her family, came to the country when she was 12 from Morelos, Mexico. She's studying physiology at Evergreen Valley College. For years, she's lived cautiously in the shadows.

Obama's announcement follows the California Dream Act, signed by Gov. Jerry Brown on Oct. 8, which allows undocumented students to receive private financial aid for higher education and state Cal Grants

"There is a lot of optimism in the community. People are very hopeful," said Jazmin Segura, the federal policy advocate at Siren, a San Jose immigration advocacy group.

Juan, 17, an incoming freshman at San Jose State University whose name has been changed for his protection, welcomed the new laws. Like many other undocumented students, he came to the U.S. as a child. He was brought from his native state, Michoacan, Mexico, by his mother when he was only a few months old.

He was admitted to the University of San Francisco, but did not enroll because he could not get financial aid without a Social Security number.

The California Dream Act will make it easier for students like Juan to get private and state aid, but not federal aid. "It's going to help out a lot with tuition. My mom and I were both happy," he said.

It wasn't easy getting the act passed in California, and so far a national Dream Act has not passed, Segura said, despite intense lobbying.

How Obama's new policy will be administered is still unclear. The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service has 60 days to create an application process.

Lifting the fear of deportation changes how undocumented students view education. "I was thinking, man, I'm in a tough spot because when I graduate college I'll have a bachelor's in whatever I decide to get, but who would hire me?" said Juan.

Immigrants welcome relief from deportation

With the election around the corner, critics say the proposal was only a political move, but those whom it affects said they don't care about Obama's motivations. "If that's what he does I don't mind. He's helping people," said Juan.

They still have worries about the new laws. "If Congress decides they don't like it and makes a new rule, passes it, and goes against what Obama is trying to do then I'm worried," Juan said. "If [Mitt] Romney gets elected I doubt we're going to get much help from him." **Immigrants** also worry that even if they get a work permit, it might not be renewed in two years.

But opponents see the Dream Act and Obama's new proposal as giving amnesty to lawbreakers, and only encouraging more illegal immigration.

Obama is "thumbing his nose at the rule of law," said Jim Gilchrist, founder of the Minutemen Project, which opposes illegal immigration. "I do not hate Mexicans or people of color."

Children brought under no fault of their own should return to their homeland and apply for legal status. It seems unrealistic, but it's the law." Gilchrist said he is a "passionate supporter of the rule of law and a law enforcement advocate." He said the Minutemen do not recognize Obama's new policy on **deportation**. "We will only abide by laws passed by Congress, and with overwhelming support of Congress, not by the signature by a president who is trying to pander to get more voters to the Democratic Party."

The Minutemen see the issue as one of national identity. Gilchrist said, "If we literally let the populations of Mexico and Latin America transfer themselves here we will rapidly become a Latin American nation, which is going to compete with our traditional culture, our language."

Not everyone thinks this way, especially those who were brought here when they were younger and consider themselves Americans now. Segura said, "They've been wanting to contribute to this economy and this country and they consider themselves to be Americans. These small steps have been significant in their lives because of that." Juan said, "My dad has been living here for more than 20 years. We have a house, we have a dog, and five people in the family. We have cars."

The new law won't help all undocumented people, however.

Jose Librojo of Daly City, who came here from the Philippines when he was 15, has fought his **deportation** for more than a year. But he doesn't qualify for Obama's new policy because, at 32, he missed its cut-off age by two years. "I'm happy for all the Dreamers out there, but unfortunately I didn't make the cut."

Neves plans to transfer to University of California-Irvine because of the Dream Act and Obama's **relief**. She can now go to school full time and qualify for financial aid.

"My mom kept asking why I was putting so much of my time into school when I couldn't even get a good job after, and I told her: 'Something will happen!'" And something did.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES (90%); PUBLIC POLICY (90%); STUDENTS & STUDENT LIFE (90%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (89%); STUDENT FINANCIAL AID (89%); LOBBYING (77%); EXECUTIVE ORDERS (77%); PASSPORTS & VISAS (77%); IMMIGRATION (77%); CITIZENSHIP (77%); US PRESIDENTIAL

Immigrants welcome relief from deportation

CANDIDATES 2012 (77%); LEGISLATION (77%); US PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES 2008 (77%); LICENSES & PERMITS (70%); ACADEMIC ADMISSIONS (70%)

Organization: SAN JOSE STATE UNIVERSITY (54%)

Industry: COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES (90%)

Person: BARACK OBAMA (79%); JERRY BROWN (51%)

Geographic: SAN JOSE, CA, USA (88%); SAN FRANCISCO, CA, USA (79%); CALIFORNIA, USA (93%); MEXICO (92%); UNITED STATES (92%)

Load-Date: November 29, 2012

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