

Daniel Rubin: More courage from a Dreamer on immigration

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Body

Maria Marroquin asked that I not use her last name when I interviewed her in June. She was 23 and here illegally, one of thousands of immigrants brought to America as kids, then left in limbo.

After graduating from Cheltenham High School, she had to attend Montgomery County Community College as an international student at three times the tuition. Her two-year degree took her five years to afford. But she finished with a 3.98 grade-point average.

That means someone has a very able babysitter. Without documentation, that's the work she has found to pay for her next degree. Her parents' decision to come here on a tourist visa - they told the family they were all going to Disney World - has for Maria Marroquin been anything but a vacation.

She grew bolder as a bill wended through Congress this fall to grant permanent residency to those under age 35 who'd been in the country five years and had spent two years in college or the military.

The bill had broad support. And over the fall she started using her full name in interviews, organizing phone banks, speaking nationally for those Dream Activists who want to make the most of themselves in this country.

They were brought here as children through no fault of their own, they argue. They want to study, to work, to serve. Their status wastes all that potential.

The bill passed through the U.S. House but died in the Senate. Lobbying by White House cabinet members, Catholic bishops, and union and school officials couldn't raise five votes needed for passage.

Republicans who had supported the Dream Act withdrew their support after facing challenges back home by those with harder positions on **immigration**.

Since then hopes for **Dreamers** have fallen as legislation has begun moving through state houses to block undocumented immigrants from attending the most competitive state universities.

That's what sent Marroquin down to Atlanta last week, to a protest at Georgia State University, where she called for its president to refuse to require applicants to prove their citizenship.

It's what caused her to sit down, wearing her graduation mortarboard, in the middle of a busy intersection Tuesday afternoon with six fellow students without papers.

It's what got her arrested.

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What made her risk being returned to Peru, a land where she has not lived since she was 13?

"I just grew tired of being in my situation," she said by phone Thursday. "When the bill failed and the politicians didn't stand up for us, we had to stand up, for ourselves, for my younger brother and sister."

For more than 24 hours the five young women and two young men were locked up at the Atlanta Corrections Detention Center. Soon after the bars clanged shut, two representatives from the U.S. Department of Immigration and Customs Enforcement visited them.

One of the officers wanted to know Marroquin's birthday and where she was born. When he presented a statement for her to sign, she joined the others in asking to speak with their lawyer first.

The ICE representatives left without beginning deportation proceedings. After an arraignment on charges of unlawful assembly and obstructing traffic, the group was released.

She said the protesters wanted to get arrested. They calculated that ICE would leave them alone. "We wanted to show how broken the system is and how they take advantage of people who don't speak the language and don't go out in public. We speak out. We have support."

She sounded a lot older than the young woman I had coffee with in Chestnut Hill, when she was working for a pizza place that paid her under the table.

Was jail scary? I asked.

"No. It wasn't scary at all," she said. "I had come to terms with it."

A little later I asked her whether anything surprised her about the experience.

"There were some very stressful times in jail," she said. "But all five women were together. We bonded." She sounded as if she was still giving speeches.

Her boyfriend, Mark Cortez, is also without documentation. He let me talk to Marroquin by phone as a couple of dozen supporters of the Dream Act rallied at 5 p.m. Thursday outside the Center City office of U.S. Sen. Pat Toomey (R., Pa.).

Cortez and Marroquin's brother, Cesar, and sister, Fernanda, didn't sound nearly as stoic as Maria did.

All three had a hard time addressing the rally.

"It gets really emotional when you know somebody and they're willing to take that risk," Fernanda Marroquin, who is 22, told the crowd through tears.

Marroquin's attorney said that all charges will disappear if the protesters agree to perform community service in Georgia.

But the attorney, David Bennion of the Nationalities Service Center at 12th and Arch, remains worried about another visit from ICE.

"They definitely know who she is now. She's very public. At any point in time they could come after her."

Lawmakers could use some of her courage.

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