

Immigration profile: Jose Juan Reyes fights for rights of the undocumented

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Body

Community Leaders Organizing Undocumented Dreamers, or CLOUD, is a recently formed organization in Contra Costa County that is joining with Bay Area allies to empower and educate the community about the struggles of illegal immigrants while collectively striving to achieve equity.

To help the community understand their personal struggles, CLOUD leaders share their stories.

Jose Juan Reyes

Age: 21

Attends College of Marin; lives in Richmond

"I came here when I was around 7 or 8 years old from Toluca, Mexico. My father had previously come two years before and we stayed back home -- with my mom and my sister. I was going to school and all of a sudden my mom said, 'We've got to go.' I didn't even get to say goodbye to anyone.

We took a plane to Tijuana, along with my uncle. He was going with us. I was confused about what was going on. We stayed at a home of a person who was going to cross us over the border.

I hadn't seen my father for like two years. When he left, I was like 5 years old. It was like a blurry memory.

My sister and I crossed in a car with two men and (the border patrol) didn't ask for documents. We got to San Diego and we stayed at a home where my father's boss used to live. The following day, we took a train to Orange County and I got picked up by my dad and another guy. When my dad showed up, I was like, 'Who is that guy?' He had a mustache. He was wearing stunners (sunglasses).

My mom had to stay back. She got detained by immigration. She got detained like three times and one day she got tired and she decided to go herself without any documentation and they let her through.

It was a moment where I realized I was starting a new era in my life. Growing up in Orange County, in Costa Mesa, I was going to really good schools. At first, my English was really bad, but by third grade I was already speaking English and reading. By fourth grade I was already at the reading level of a sixth-grader. When I got to school, they were learning how to add and subtract. In Mexico, I was already multiplying and dividing.

After many years, I realized there was something wrong. There was something missing in my life. I was not equal. I thought: 'Why do my parents have to use another name to work and to put food on the table?' But I didn't mind, because that was the only way they could do it.

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We moved to Richmond when I was in seventh grade. I went to Richmond High and got A's and B's. I got a letter that said: 'You're a really good student we want you to go abroad.' They were going to pay for everything. But, my parents said: 'Are you crazy? You could never get back.'

By that time, I understood that my parents had been struggling all their lives. I heard stories like: 'I had to drop out. I was in college, but I needed to work to sustain myself.' That's when I realized I needed to get to college.

By 10th grade I got the opportunity to do a mural about relations between African-Americans and Latinos.

Then, I got appointed to another program where a teacher taught us to create an impact with a poster and words or poems. I was still getting really good grades, but Richmond High was still a struggle because I met the wrong people. I was skipping class. I got jumped a couple of times by several individuals, so I decided to switch schools to San Rafael High. So, that's where I graduated from. I had to drive and I needed a parking permit, but there was no way to get a parking permit because I had no license.

I went to a business school in Belmont, by Redwood City. My parents were struggling. The recession was hitting. My dad was unemployed. My mother wasn't working as much. So that's when I decided to back off.

I went to a community center in Richmond. I was still learning, but I catch onto things fast. After time, people started seeing me as an asset to the community. I started leading more. I remember working for the Healthy Richmond initiative, going door to door, and I got to see the needs of the community and every person had a different need and different struggles.

Eventually, some folks from Building Blocks for Kids hired me and we did so many great things. I learned so much from them.

And then deferred action came out. I was like: 'Yo, this hits me. This is where I have to be.'

I met Carlos and helped form CLOUD.

I think that leading is about looking at the bigger spectrum of things. It's been a struggle for me, not being able to work legally. I'm a contractor. I've never used a fake Social Security number. I can't legally drive yet.

I feel a lot of anger just for that simple reason: I can't legally drive, own a house, have a credit score that is nice and presentable so I could apply for a loan to go to school to do all these big things in life. I'm really proud of where I'm from. But this is my home. The U.S. is my home. You can't deny that. But everybody closes the doors on you.

So, we're emphasizing: 'We're not illegal, we're undocumented.' That's something I strongly believe.

Richmond has this negative connotation that people here are bad, but that's not true and I just like being part of this movement because I know I can make a difference. I don't want to just sit home and not do anything. I realize that life is much greater than that.

We're a few youngsters doing this work, but I have never, ever seen the willingness the dreamers -- the undocumented students -- are having. This is something that has changed my perspective because they are so talented. That's what's making CLOUD. Without them, CLOUD wouldn't be anything. Some of these folks don't have any experience organizing. But, they see you and it's like something changes and it's like: 'Dude, where can I sign up?' We have high school students and people older than us looking up to us, so it's something that's awesome.

We put up this quote by Cesar Chavez: 'Once social change begins, it cannot be reversed. You can't uneducate somebody who has learned to read. You cannot humiliate a person who feels pride. You cannot oppress a people who are not afraid. We have seen the future and the future is ours.'

Once we know that things are possible, we're going to fight even stronger to make it happen. I'm not afraid to go out and say: 'Yes, we can do this.'

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Graphic

Community Leaders Organizing **Undocumented** Dreamers (C.L.O.U.D.) member **Jose Juan Reyes**, 21, is photographed in Richmond, Calif. on Friday, Sept. 7, 2012. C.L.O.U.D. started about two months ago and has about 25 core leaders. About 98 percent of the leaders are **undocumented**. (**Jose** Carlos Fajardo/Staff)

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