

Young immigrants raise voices, and hopes

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Body

Last Saturday, a group of students trickled out of the sprawling conference center near Vanderbilt University and lined up next to a lush green lawn for a practice march.

Matthias Everette, 11, and James Butts, 13, two black students from Mississippi, held up a banner. Also nearby was 19-year-old Andres Ramon, of Homestead, an illegal immigrant who arrived from Guatemala at age 6.

The unlikely blend of African-American and Hispanic students from Southern states, including three dozen from Dade City and other parts of Florida, were here last weekend to learn how to organize marches, launch voter registration drives and build alliances to push for legalizing illegal immigrants.

Along the way, they learned they had more in common than they realized.

And as the battle over immigration intensifies in the months ahead, the students were told that together they could be the key to turning the immigration debate into a movement.

"When the tough times come ... youth will be important in keeping it going," said Rich Stolz of the nonprofit Center for Community Change, one of the Washington groups advocating for legalization of illegal immigrants.

The Senate is expected to pass a broadly written bill before Memorial Day that sweeps together border security measures with new programs to accommodate the nation's 12-million illegal residents.

That means the summer in Washington will be spent in tough negotiations as the Senate tries to marry its legislation with the bill passed by the House late last year. The House bill avoids offering avenues for legal residency to illegal workers and is focused on border enforcement and deportation.

Although House members recently have expressed some interest in expanding guest worker programs, the differences remain stark.

Inspired by the plight of friends who are illegal immigrants, Elizabeth Vasquez and her sister Bess recently used text messages and MySpace.com to orchestrate a recent school walkout of 1,500 students in South Florida.

That put the Vasquez sisters, 15 and 14 respectively, at the forefront of the movement to give immigrants legal status. And last weekend, it put Elizabeth on a 16-hour bus ride from South Florida to Nashville.

"My friend that helped me with the walkout, she was born in Mexico but she has lived here all her life," said Vasquez. "She was text-messaging me, 'You think this will change things?' I said, 'I think so.' "

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Nearly 100 young people and adults from around the South attended the training in Nashville.

It included practical advice: Students were urged to have diverse groups "standing in solidarity" at their marches and rallies so observers could not tell which students were illegal.

Some of the black students and their adult chaperones said the recent marches of Hispanic immigrants and their supporters around the country were an inspiration - and a potential ally on common issues.

"You can't have (thousands) of people walk out of school and not recognize it as an opportunity for a movement, an opportunity for us to bring our issues together," said Christi Ketchum, 31, who brought youth from Project South in Atlanta.

Many recent marchers were young people whose parents brought them to the United States as children. They find out at the end of high school that as illegal immigrants they can't go to college mainly because they don't qualify for most financial aid. If they earn degrees, they can't get jobs legally. In Nashville, the group included illegal students from Haiti and Latin America.

Maria Sanchez, 19, of Dade City was born in Mexico and graduated from Pasco High School in 2004. But instead of going to college, she began working at two gas stations.

So the event in Nashville focused on the "Dream Act." The proposed federal legislation would allow certain illegal students to attend college and become citizens, but it has languished in Congress for five years. It is now included in the Senate bill.

But legalizing immigrants may require a long-term commitment from young people, Stolz warned. For example, when the civil rights movement appeared to lose momentum in the 1960s, it was reignited when African-Americans, some of them young people, were attacked by police dogs, he said.

"The backlash against this movement is already starting," said Stolz, who noted that the Minutemen, the volunteer group that patrols the Mexican border, was scheduled to pass through Nashville a couple of days later on the way to Washington.

In the South, organizers said immigrants need alliances with sympathetic groups, perhaps African-Americans.

"Blacks have been brainwashed to think, '(Hispanic immigrants) are coming to take your jobs,' " said Hollis Watkins, 64, a member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in Mississippi during the 1960s. "We have to break that custom and realize we have a common enemy."

Quality education is just one common interest, black participants said. Some compared the threat of deportation immigrants face to the high numbers of black inmates in prison.

"It's the same issue as deportation," said Chris Adagbonyin, 23, of the Young People's Project in Jackson, Miss. "Me being African-American, we have an issue of 'We are going to put you in prison.' "

The Hispanic activists talked about building alliances with voters of all races when they got back home. But their first job was to reach out to African-American students.

"I learned a lot about the Dream Act," said Sharde Williams, a 16-year-old high school student from Beaufort, S.C. "I mean, immigrants do deserve a chance, too. It's not just us as United States citizens that deserve privileges. They deserve to be smart just as we are."

Last weekend, the students walked in step toward Vanderbilt University with signs that read: "Help Make Our Dream a Reality," "Fixing Broken Dreams," and "No Student Left Behind, Period."

Some of the practice chants were directed at Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, R-Tenn., who is controlling the immigration debate.

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"I believe that people in my situation, we just can't sit around and get depressed," said Ramon, the 19-year-old from Homestead. "By coming here, it's not only being an activist, but to show that there are people that have dreams, that want to accomplish something but they can't."

Before leaving for their home states, the students made plans for a "Dream Coalition" Web site.

"I was a little bit depressed before I came here," said Sanchez of Dade City. "Now it's like 'Wow.' I feel like I want to do this and I want to make a change."

Graphic

PHOTO, ALLEN BRYANT, (2)

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