News



Sen. Richard Durbin (center) stands with (l-r) Georgetown President Jack DeGioia, Dreamer Cristina Velasquez, Jeff Chapski, President of the Georgetown University Alumni Association, Jane Aiken, Vice Dean of the Georgetown Law Center, and Joel S. Hellman, Dean of the Georgetown's Walsh School of Foreign Service (Julie Bourbon)



by Julie Bourbon

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Sen. Richard Durbin (D-Illinois), who has been in the thick of the immigration debate as one of the original authors of the still-unpassed legislation to protect Dreamers, was honored by Georgetown University Feb. 28 for his "outstanding and exemplary service" to the community in support of humanitarian causes.

The senator "has vigorously promoted bipartisan legislation to protect our young people who arrived in U.S. as children," said Georgetown president Jack DeGioia in introducing Durbin. Georgetown has been particularly vocal about its support for its student Dreamers and DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) recipients.

Durbin, who received both undergraduate and law degrees from the university, is only the sixth recipient of the Timothy S. Healy S.J., Award, named after the late Georgetown president who went on to serve as president of the New York Public Library. Other alumni recipients have included former President Bill Clinton and retired Sen. George Mitchell (D-Maine).

The evening was styled as a conversation between Durbin and Joel S. Hellman, dean of Georgetown's Walsh School of Foreign Service, of which Durbin is an alumnus, followed by questions from students in the audience.

Durbin recounted his family's own immigration story as having planted the seed for his commitment to the issue. He noted that his Lithuanian mother's weathered naturalization certificate, dated 1925, and the filing receipt for $2.50 hang in a frame in his office.

"It's just a reminder of who I am," he said.

Student questions ranged from his most significant memory of his time at Georgetown — "history," he responded, before sharing recollections of the Kennedy assassination and subsequent funeral, which he witnessed — to the lack of civility in politics, gun legislation, and of course, immigration.

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He assured students that there was more collegiality among members of the Senate than they might believe, given news media reports, but he blamed the glut of special interest money in Washington for preventing important work from getting done.

"It used to be a given if you were an incumbent senator and you didn't get indicted, you were going to get reelected," he said, partly in jest. "Now, because of Citizens United, the fundraising pressure has grown exponentially. Members of the Senate on both sides live in mortal fear that if they make a misstep, they wind up with a primary opponent."

He added, "it isn't like it used to be, when people took on really challenging bills and brought them to the floor and exposed them to debate that went on for weeks. We've restructured everything so you don't have to take a vote that's going to be held against you."

When asked about the possibility of gun control legislation passing, he expressed admiration for the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School students who have seized control of the conversation in the last two weeks, but said Republican leadership is "losing interest in it day by day."



Sen. Durbin with a group of Georgetown Dreamers, including recent graduate Cristina Velasquez, far right (Julie Bourbon)

One of Georgetown's Dreamers spoke before Durbin was introduced. Cristina Velasquez, 23, graduated in December and plans to start Teach for America in the fall. She credited the university with teaching her how to be a woman for others, giving her a "sense of duty to do the unrequired," and said she didn't know if she would be standing there were it not for Durbin's courage to fight for young people like her.

At the end of the evening, she expressed fear about her future. "It's all day by day. It's hard to stay optimistic," Velasquez said. A native of Venezuela brought to this country at age 6, she can't imagine going back, given the political turmoil there. But, she said, "living here in limbo isn't freedom."

It's been a busy week for Durbin, who appeared Feb. 27 at the Catholic Day of Action for Dreamers on Capitol Hill, a rally that drew more than 250 supporters and ended with the arrests of 42 protesters. Durbin was there at the invitation of two religious sisters from Chicago he has accompanied in the past to visit immigrants in detention in Illinois.

"It's great to have them as allies," he told NCR, of the rally participants and the Catholics who phoned their representatives on Feb. 26 for the national call-in day sponsored by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. "We've just got to keep the pressure on."

When told of Jesuit Fr. Tom Reese's stirring call at the rally to Speaker of the House Paul Ryan (R-Wisconsin) — "Paul, Paul, why do you persecute me?" — he laughed, then grew serious.

"Paul Ryan has to hear from his voters, as well as those who have common background with him, how important his role is," Durbin said. "He can change this overnight. He would risk his speakership to do it, but he could do it."

[Julie Bourbon reports for NCR from Washington.]