NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

Immigrant youth, adults gather for National Coming Out of The Shadows day

Kaitlin Kimont | Mar. 16, 2012
Immigration and the Church

David Martinez and his wife, Fanny Lopez-Martinez, after her emotional speech about being an undocumented Army wife (Samantha Sanchez)

CHICAGO -- In an effort to put a face on the need for comprehensive immigration reform, a group of college-age immigrant youths publicly declared themselves to be undocumented at a rally here on Saturday.

"National Coming Out of the Shadows" is an annual week in Chicago where undocumented activists challenge the criminalization of immigrants by "coming out" and publicly telling their stories of struggles and hardships as undocumented youths. The event got its start in 2010.

Members of three organizations led by undocumented immigrants in Illinois -- Nuestra Voz (NV), the Latin@ Youth Action League (L@YAL) and the Immigrant Youth Justice League (IYJL) -- spoke of the adversities they face for lacking a nine-digit Social Security number, including not being able to apply for jobs, getting a driver's license or applying for financial aid for college.

Arianna Salgado, an undocumented student who declared her status at the 2011 rally, helped organize the event and said personal stories help bring more attention to the cause and struggles undocumented youth and their families face.

"I support this so strongly because I'm undocumented," she said. "I think it's very important for us as undocumented youth to come out and to share our stories because it brings more attention and show that we are just like anybody else. That we are students, that we're brothers, we're sisters, we're neighbors and that we deserve to be here."

Seven undocumented immigrants faced the possibility of deportation in front of a crowd of about 1,000 supporters, activists, allies and law enforcement. Tears and applause overcame the crowd as each speech ended with, "I'm undocumented, unafraid and unapologetic."

Fanny Lopez-Martinez, a graduate of Dominican University who is now working toward a master's degree in public policy at the University of Chicago, publicly declared her undocumented status next to her husband, David, a U.S. Army veteran who returned from Afghanistan in August.

"I cannot understand why a military family has to go through this struggle," she said. "Nobody talks about what it's like to be an undocumented military spouse."

"My husband needs me now, just as he did when he was deployed. I'm a college graduate and I will get my master's degree soon, but I can't get a job. I can't even help my husband pay for groceries, for rent, for gas, for other expenses. I feel helpless," she said.

David Martinez spoke in support of his wife and declared himself an ally.

"My wife shouldn't have to worry about being deported before I get home, if I get home. I shouldn't have to worry about my own government taking her away from me. So many people believe this is no longer an issue since we're married," he said.

Lopez-Martinez said receiving her legalization has been difficult and frustrating because each time she has applied to adjust her status, she has been told to wait for the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act to pass because she cannot prove enough hardship to stay in the United States.

"As an Army wife, I gave a service to this country," she continued through tears. "Through each phone call, text message, Skype session and letter, I made sure to provide my solider with the love and support that he needed. I think going through a deployment is more than enough hardship."

The DREAM Act was introduced into Congress in 2009 and, if passed, would help undocumented students attend college, prepare for jobs and find ways to legalize their status. A state version of the DREAM Act was passed in Illinois in May 2011 and allows the awarding of privately funded college scholarships to as many as

95,000 children of undocumented immigrants.

Opponents to the legislation argue that it rewards and encourages illegal immigration and is unfair to American-born and legal immigrant parents and children who pay full tuition for higher-level education.

The bill was reintroduced into the Senate in May 2011, and President Barack Obama promised to double his efforts to pass the DREAM Act, which also says immigrant students who have grown up in the United States will have the ability to obtain full citizenship if they have a clean criminal record.

Hugo Dominguez, who came to the United States from Mexico when he was 9 years old with his father and younger brother, was among the undocumented youth declaring his status Saturday. He said teaching his friends to understand and to empathize with what being "undocumented" means to him and to many others was a large factor in his coming out decision.

"When I go out and say this publicly, it's teaching people what really being undocumented is," he said. "I read a lot on the Internet and people say to go back to your country and 'You guys just come to destroy our cities,' but they don't really know the struggles that we overcame over there to come over here. Unity really is everything."

An additional rally will take place Friday in DuPage County to bring the cause to the Chicago suburbs. The rally will challenge the criminalization of undocumented immigrants in front of the county sheriff's office.

As the courts debate the immigration issue, undocumented activist youth and their supporters say they plan continue bringing attention this cause by continuing to come out and educate the public.

"I am strong and I will keep fighting until politicians stop playing games with my life," Lopez-Martinez said. "If they keep saying that I am a criminal in this society, I will continue to prove them wrong. I'm a valuable human being, Army wife and graduate student. I define myself."

[Kaitlin Kimont, former editor of the Dominican University student newspaper, is now a writer living in Chicago.]

Source URL (retrieved on *08/30/2016 - 22:43*): https://www.ncronline.org/news/immigrant-youth-adults-gather-national-coming-out-shadows-day