

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

DACA recipients at UTD find themselves in limbo as Trump administration announces decision to terminate program



VALERIE PEREZ | MERCURY STAFF

Historical studies sophomore Ociel Galindo (left) and international political economy junior Mercedes Molina wear the Mexican and American flags at a rally on Sept. 13 to show solidarity with undocumented students.

BHARGAV ARIMILLI
Life & Arts Editor

Editor's Note: The name of Jose was changed to protect his identity.

Jose was two years old when he boarded a bus bound for the U.S.-Mexico border. His grandfather fed him grapes in the dark to stave off hunger during the 12-hour journey.

"That's the oldest memory I have," he said. "That's the only memory of Mexico I have."

He fell asleep and woke up on the other side of the border in a car driven by coyotes — smugglers who facilitate migration across the border — travelling toward Dallas, where Jose's father, who had migrated earlier, was waiting. Since then, Jose grew up in the Metroplex under the looming threat of deportation.

Now a UTD junior studying computer science, Jose received work authorization and completed an internship as a recipient of the Deferred Action

for Childhood Arrivals program, an Obama-era policy implemented in 2012 that allows certain individuals who entered the country illegally as minors to obtain renewable two-year work permits and grants exemption from deportation.

"I remember feeling relieved because I could actually use my education for something. My initial thought was I would have to graduate here and then move to Mexico," Jose said. "I had a vision of my future. It wasn't just a big blur."

But now his future, like those of nearly 800,000 other DACA recipients, lies in limbo.

The Trump administration an-

nounced its intent to terminate the DACA program on Sept. 5, claiming that undocumented migrants were usurping jobs from native-born citizens and driving down wages.

"We knew it was coming," said Mercedes Molina, an international political economy junior and president of UTD's chapter of the League of United Latin American Citizens. "Our largest frustration at the moment is that we feel like we're being used as political pawns."

With the rescission of DACA, student groups on campus are calling on their local representatives to pass the DREAM Act — a bipartisan proposal intended to provide undocumented immigrants with

“They can kill our work permits and they can kill everything we’ve worked for, but they can’t kill our love for this country.”

— Jose,
computer science junior

school hiding it during gym, especially the girls because they had to wear shorter-sleeve shirts."

Though Jose's parents told him in the fourth grade that he was born in Mexico, it wasn't until high school that he began to make sense of his immigration status.

"To me, it didn't mean anything," he said. "It didn't matter to me until I was old enough to do the research myself and I realized I was in a different situation."

After enrolling in the DACA program, Jose received a social security number and was able to intern at a local software development firm the summer after his sophomore year of high school.

When it came to the college application process, however, his options were limited. Several scholarships required citizenship or permanent residency for consideration. UTD's Academic Excellence Scholarship was among those that

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did not take immigration status into account. Jose said one of the deciding factors in choosing UTD was its inclusive environment.

“I do feel welcome on this campus simply due to the diversity. There’s great people all around,” he said. “They all come together to form this really welcoming community for minority groups.”

There aren’t clear numbers on how many UTD students receive DACA protections. A 2016 report by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services revealed around 200,000 individuals in Texas were approved for participation in the DACA program by the third quarter of 2016.

Although several of his friends at UTD have benefited from DACA protections, Jose said it was important to make the distinction between the work of the individual and the provisions of the program.

“It was their hard work and their grades and their efforts, not

the effort of DACA,” he said. “DACA was simply a key into a whole world of possibilities, but they’re the ones who brought themselves to the door.”

UTD President Richard Benson released a statement on the day of Trump’s announcement reiterating the university’s commitment to protecting DACA students while noting its obligations to follow the law.

“I supported DACA because the United States needs bright, talented individuals,” Benson wrote. “Students who have been raised and educated here represent America at its finest.”

Molina and members of LU-LAC met with Benson at the start of the school year to discuss issues such as DACA and Senate Bill 4, a law requiring local police to enforce federal immigration law. Molina said the administration was receptive to their concerns, agreeing to include a list of immigration resources in safe zones across campus.

In response to the Trump administration’s decision, LU-LAC and MASA members

handed out flyers on the plinth with instructions on how to get in touch with local representatives. They also organized a rally on Sept. 13 near the Spirit Rocks to stand in solidarity with undocumented students. Attendees painted the rocks with Spanish slogans and created signs to protest the decision.

“We couldn’t have asked for a more supportive community at the time,” Molina said.

Jose planned to pursue a career in software development after graduation. Now, with his future uncertain, Jose might be forced to move back to Mexico once his work permit expires. From there, he said he hopes to save money to buy his family a home and eventually move to Canada or Europe.

For now, Jose said he’s focused on the matter at hand.

“We’re going to keep fighting for it. We belong here,” he said. “They can kill our work permits and they can kill everything we’ve worked for, but they can’t kill our love for this country.”

REDEFINING 'REFUGEE'

Student channels past experience as refugee into political activism

STORY BY: BHARGAV ARIMILLI | LIFE & ARTS EDITOR
PHOTO BY: AMBARINA HASTA | MERCURY STAFF

When Henry Justiniano raised his right hand and recited the oath of allegiance at his U.S. naturalization ceremony in November, he felt like nothing had changed.

"I saw all the people around me," he said. "They were from different countries and they were so excited. But for me, I always saw myself as American."

Justiniano, a mechanical engineering sophomore, came to the United States in 1989 at the age of 4, fleeing the civil war in El Salvador. To clear U.S. immigration at the Mexican-American border in Brownsville, Texas, Justiniano used a friend's passport.

"I remember them training me to say his name," he said. "At 4 years old, I had no choice. I just did what the grown-ups told me to do."

After reuniting with his mother and sister in Dallas, he was given refugee status under the Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act, a 1997



Henry Justiniano, a mechanical engineering sophomore, came to the United States in 1989 as a refugee from El Salvador. Since then, he has served in the military and become a naturalized citizen.

law that provided immigration benefits and relief from deportation for refugees from former Soviet bloc nations in Central America.

Justiniano and his family were eventually able to obtain permanent residency. Since then, he assumed an American identity and didn't look back — until now, as he begins to piece together the parts of his life before his arrival in the United States.

Justiniano said his mother didn't speak Spanish at home or didn't talk about her time in El Salvador, perhaps in an attempt to move on from her previous life and focus on her new one. As a child, he wasn't aware of his refugee status.

"I would tell my (younger) self to be more aware that I wasn't from here," he said. "I didn't think about it much until now. I would tell myself to embrace the culture. I'm doing that now, and it's a little harder."

Justiniano said he didn't face discrimination during his childhood on account of being a refugee, but that he was reminded of it at one point during a college visit to Southern Methodist University in 2004. While on a tour for incoming freshmen, Justiniano said

an SMU student hosting a bake sale to protest affirmative action told him he was only admitted to the school on account of his citizenship status and race.

“We’re here for a reason. Some of us didn’t want to leave. Some of us didn’t have a choice.”

— Henry Justiniano, sophomore

"They didn't see me the same," Justiniano said. "I went home that day and thought about what I could do for people to see me the same. What do people respect here, with no questions asked? The military."

He enlisted in the Navy and served for four years at Joint Expeditionary Base Little Creek-Fort

Story, an amphibious base in Virginia.

The Department of Defense permits non-U.S. citizens holding permanent residency to join the armed forces, but prevents them from occupying positions requiring a security clearance. In addition, permanent residents who serve in the military are eligible for an expedited and fee-free naturalization process.

Justiniano said he wasn't treated differently as a non-U.S. citizen serving in the Navy.

"Everyone saw me as a brother and as an American because I was serving for the U.S.," he said.

Justiniano submitted his naturalization paperwork last year on July 4 — a date he chose deliberately — and

completed the process in November. He said his first act as a U.S. citizen would be to use his vote in Texas' March 6 elections to stand in solidarity with DACA recipients and refugees across the country facing uncertain futures.

"I've always felt like I was American," he said. "The only thing that was different was that it wasn't on paper. DACA recipients and refugees see themselves as Americans. I know it feels."

Now, as a citizen, Justiniano said he has found himself increasingly at odds with fellow members of the Republican party who oppose immigration

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amnesty of any kind.

“I was raised conservative, but I can’t get rid of feeling empathy for ... (DACA recipients) because I’ve kind of been in the same shoes,” he said.

For Justiniano, the conversations he has had with fellow conservatives have been difficult.

“It rubs me the wrong way when conservatives say, ‘Go away, you’re illegal. Do it the right way,’” he said. “We’re here for a reason.

Some of us didn’t want to leave. Some of us didn’t have a choice.”

A Feb. 14 CNBC report revealed that the Trump administration is planning to scale down refugee resettlement programs in more than 60 offices across the nation. A State Department spokeswoman said in an email to Reuters on Feb. 14 that the drop in the number of refugees entering the country in 2018 no longer necessitated the operation of all 324 resettlement offices in the country. In Texas, 7 of the 25 offices were affected.

Justiniano said the news motivated him to get involved in community activism.

“It’s not surprising,” he said. “I’m going to try to do my best to get people to vote. Our age group is a big part of the population, but everyone says, ‘I’m not going to vote because my vote isn’t going to count.’”

Justiniano crossed party lines and began campaigning for Beto O’Rourke, the Democratic contender against incumbent Ted Cruz.

Through his experiences with natural-

ization and political activism, Justiniano said he began to piece together memories of his childhood in San Salvador, the capital city of El Salvador, in an effort to reclaim part of his identity.

“I told (my uncle) about a couple of dreams I had about bombs going off, and he said, ‘No, that really happened,’” Justiniano said. “The fighting was just outside of our house. You could hear it all.”

His interest in his heritage prompted him to search for members of his family who remained in El Salvador. In 2013,

he was able to get in contact with his biological father. Justiniano said he plans to return to El Salvador after graduating in 2019 to meet his biological father for the first time.

For the time being, however, Justiniano said he’s working to ensure DACA recipients and refugees feel like they belong.

“We’re voting for them,” he said. “There’s a lot more people who are willing to help than there’s people not willing to help. We’re just in a place right now where the minority is in power.”