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Thalia Roussos

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## **Interview with: An American DREAMer Shaping the Land of Opportunity**

*By Thalia Roussos*

For two brothers, it started as a weekend trip to visit a high school friend. As the boys heard the train conductor announce their stop in Buffalo, New York, United States Immigration and Customs Control agents (“ICE”) stepped aboard and ordered passengers to present identification of United States citizenship. Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the reach of ICE within the U.S. has broadened in an effort to find undocumented individuals with criminal records and suspected terrorists. However, while border control in southern states like Arizona has been a topic of lively debate, the *New York Times* notes that border security changes along the Northern U.S. border are “happening without public debate.” But experiences like that of the Robles brothers put undocumented young people in the spotlight.

Just minutes after the ICE agents boarded the train to check passengers’ documentation, these agents led the two teenage brothers off the train car. Carlos Robles and his younger brother are not U.S. citizens. They had nothing to show the agents that day. “Everyone was staring at us suspiciously,” Carlos said. Yet despite the glares from passengers on the train, Carlos described the border patrol agents as lenient. “They were apologizing, acknowledging that we didn’t do anything wrong, but also telling us that they had to do what they had to do.” Carlos suggested that his American English, young age, and untarnished legal record distinguished the treatment he and his brother received from others at the immigration detention center. The agents seemed “conflicted about how to treat us because we were kids—easy to relate to and able to express ourselves clearly.”

Against the instinct to turn to their parents for help, upon arrest, Carlos and his brother did not call their parents. They knew this would expose their parents’ undocumented status. After eight hours of paperwork, immigration agents took the brothers to the county jail. Carlos explained, “when we were taken off the train, I thought they would send us straight to Mexico. I didn’t know that the deportation process could take so long.” Carlos mentions his fleeting

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thought of living in his family's old town in Mexico as he sat in the station. Carlos matter-of-factly said, "You don't go to school there . . . it is not nice to live there. Maybe we would find somewhere new to go?" The teenager pondered these life-changing situations, wracking his brain for what to do next.

The first people Carlos called from the police station were his high school tennis coaches. Carlos and his brother played on the school's tennis team throughout high school. They grew close to the teachers and coaches who recognized their ability to overcome language barriers and other challenges as new students in the U.S. Within hours of calling his coaches, they had built a network that connected Carlos and his brother to a lawyer from the National Immigrant Justice Center ("NIJC"). One of the coaches came to the county jail in Buffalo to post their bond. Carlos reflected on his parent's commitment to their children's academic and extra-curricular excellence; with his parents' motivation and guidance, the people with whom Carlos had built relationships all worked together to help on that Saturday in Buffalo.

Carlos and his family, which consisted of his brother, his sister, and his parents, all came to the U.S. from Mexico in 2004 on a temporary six-month tourist visa. Carlos was fourteen and ready to start high school. Since their arrival, Carlos and his family have remained in the U.S. Carlos excelled in his first three years of high school, only confronting his undocumented status as it came time to apply to college. "I was mad and confused about the whole process. I didn't know what to do; I just thought college was this place where, once you are there, you are there." He explained his struggle to understand the Federal Application for Student Aid ("FAFSA"), as well as his frustration that, being undocumented, he did not qualify for any significant scholarships. Carlos recalled, "I didn't know where to turn. Should I go back to Mexico?"

After extensive brainstorming between his parents, counselors, and teachers, they ultimately found a private scholarship dedicated to sending a Hispanic student to Harper Community College for two years, all expenses paid. After two years at Harper Community College, Carlos enrolled at Loyola University Chicago, a private school that could accommodate his financial needs. However,

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as a part-time student, he still could not receive substantial financial aid. Committed to furthering Carlos's education, his parents paid out of pocket from their savings for the first two years in order for Carlos to attend Loyola University. Even after confronting great financial difficulty, Carlos has a notably optimistic outlook: "I do not resent or blame my parents for leaving Mexico because we would be much worse off if we were still there."

While Carlos's story may sound similar to the journey undertaken by many others, Carlos decided to share his story. The NIJC, working with Carlos and his brother on their case, invited the Robles brothers to speak at a conference about the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act ("DREAM Act"). After the Robles brothers shared their experience with others at the conference, the NIJC reached out to the *Los Angeles Times*. Carlos and his brother sought to illuminate the personal struggles of undocumented students, as well as the positive outcomes that could be achieved through collaboration and advocacy. The article published in the *Los Angeles Times* prompted interest from newspapers all over the country, including the *Chicago Tribune*. At that point, Carlos remembers telling himself, "even if I do get deported, at least people have heard about my experience."

This publicity paved the way for the next step in the Robles brothers' case. The NIJC subsequently sent the case to Senator Dick Durbin of Illinois, who spoke with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security ("DHS"). Senator Durbin arranged for the Robles brothers to receive Federal Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals ("DACA" or "Deferred Action"), without a deportation order. Deferred Action allows children who are brought into the U.S., and pose no risk to the public, to avoid removal proceedings. However, Deferred Action does not change a person's undocumented status. Deferred Action normally requires renewal every two years to avoid deportation, at the discretion of the DHS; however, because DHS granted the Robles brothers Deferred Action without a deportation order, they would avoid being subject to this unpredictable renewal process entirely. Carlos asserted, "it was so rare, it felt like we had won the lottery. It was a year earlier than anyone else got it. It's been an amazing change to have a Social Security number, a driver's license. I feel

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legitimate—I can show my ID without question.” But should a child’s access to these documents be a rare and astounding occurrence, or should it be the humanitarian norm for children?

Though Carlos and his brother feel a weight lifted from their shoulders, Carlos still feels weighed down by the plight of others who have been less fortunate. He explains that people in the same position, including his own sister, could not get the same break. Today, however, his sister has applied for DACA. Carlos smiled and said, “When we got Deferred Action, it’s almost like my parents did, too. They know now that their children can live without fear.”

While some argue that Deferred Action is a temporary fix, Carlos acknowledged that, “While it is a patch, it’s a really nice one. And it is pretty groundbreaking—such a big change after thirty plus years of the same thing. Hopefully the Obama administration will keep moving forward.” If ever given the opportunity to stand in front of Congress in support of undocumented people seeking the American dream, Carlos would relay the following message: “We aren’t asking for the very best of everything, we’re just asking not to live in the shadows, and to have a place in society. The U.S. gave us tools to do well, and we want to use these tools here.” He asserted that although some people think undocumented immigrants benefit from U.S. services without paying their dues, mechanisms like Tax Identification Numbers ensure all types of people are accountable to the government.

Carlos has told his story to many different people and in many different forums. But each day he thinks of more he would like to share. Carlos emphasized:

“We don’t need your sympathy, we need your support to change the system and make a difference for thousands of students who want to make the U.S. better, not just better themselves. Give us a legal identity so that we are able to give back. So we’re on the books as an ‘American.’”

Carlos shrugged his shoulders as he explained that he is unsure of whether he is Mexican or American. He says he is from Mexico, but the U.S. is the country that has given his family a better life.

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Everyone in the U.S. has a different heritage behind being “American”—after all, many Americans came here to express their heritage freely. Why should young people, like Carlos and his brother, be precluded from claiming the identity they already have? Why must they be forced into choosing one identity, rather than embracing two? By giving undocumented children a legal identity, these children can stop living in fear and can openly contribute to society through the experiences that have shaped their unique identity.

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