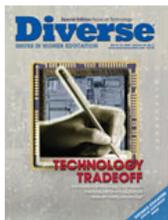




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Tuesday, March 31, 2009, 4:25



Current News

New Book Exposes Undocumented Students' Struggles

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by Emily Wilson Mar 31, 2009, 07:55

Undocumented University of California, Los Angeles students share their struggles to help advance the DREAM Act.



When Mario Escobar was getting a double major in Chicano studies and Spanish literature at the University of California, Los Angeles, money was so tight he often went to class hungry and wore clothes from Goodwill that didn't quite fit. As an undocumented student, Escobar wasn't eligible for financial aid or loans.

Escobar, who as a child fought in El Salvador's brutal civil war where his father, grandmother and cousins were killed, is no stranger to hardship. He says getting an education was worth the sacrifices he made.

Pictured here at a stop in Santa Ana, Mario Escobar participated in a student fast in July 2007 to demand immigration reform. Students also took their protests to Pasadena, Bakersfield, San Jose and San Francisco, Calif.

"My motto was, 'I can lick the floor for the rest of my life, or I can lick it now,'" he says. Escobar is no longer struggling like before. In 2007, Escobar received political asylum, and now he's on a full scholarship at Arizona State University where he's getting a Ph.D. in literature.

Escobar's story, along with those of seven other undocumented students, is featured in a book put out by the UCLA Center for Labor Research and Education, Underground Undergrads. It also has information about legislative issues affecting undocumented students such as California's Assembly Bill 540, which offers high school graduates in-state tuition, and the Federal Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, a pathway to citizenship for many college students.

"To our knowledge, it's the only book in the country about undocumented students, by undocumented students," says Kent Wong, a professor at UCLA, who taught the class, "Immigration Rights, Labor and Higher Education," that produced the book.

Wong, who has been at the university for 18 years, says he and his colleagues noticed more undocumented students in their classes since the passage of AB 540. These students' stories and their desire to get an education moved Wong. He partnered with a support group for undocumented students, IDEAS (Improving Dreams, Equality, Access and Success) that Escobar co-founded, to work on the book.

Matias Ramos, a leader in IDEAS whose story is in the book, says Underground Undergrads shows the undocumented students' humanity and will help the DREAM Act to pass. The bill has never come up for a vote in Congress, but its Senate sponsor, Sen. Richard Durbin, D-Ill., intends to try again this spring.

The legislation would allow many undocumented students to adjust to conditional permanent resident status, which could make them eligible for in-state tuition. It would apply to young people who have lived in the United States for at least five years and earned a high school diploma or GED. They could eventually seek permanent residence if they complete at least two years in college or in the military.

"Our stories are crucial to define immigration policy," Ramos says. "I think the book serves to highlight stories about goals and aspirations and families that can be multiplied by millions."

Like Escobar, Ramos came to the United States when he was 13 years old. Ramos' family wasn't fleeing violence however, but the financial collapse of the Argentine economy, where his father lost his job as an accountant and his mother hers running a kindergarten. Ramos threw himself into school, but didn't think he could afford a four-year college until he found out about AB 540, which meant he paid in-state tuition.

Paying the in-state tuition of about \$8,000 (opposed to the international tuition of almost \$30,000) with no financial aid was still a struggle for Ramos, as it is for Stephanie Solís, an editor of Underground Undergrads. An aspiring writer, she takes time off between quarters to work and save money at jobs including housecleaning, making cardboard boxes and tutoring.

Solís, whose family moved to California from the Philippines when she was 3 years old, grew up with almost no memories of her native country and blissfully unaware she didn't have a paper that made her a legal resident.

"My 18th birthday was coming up so I was thinking I should get a driver's license and register to vote," Solís says. "Eventually after weeks of hearing 'Oh, not now, we have to find your

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papers,' and a lot of dodging the question, my mom sat me down and said, 'You can't do this.'"

Solís was so upset she moved out.

"It was this huge sense of betrayal," she says. "Like finding out you were adopted or have a secret twin or something."

To feel she was getting on with her life, Solís decided to apply to college anyway, even though she didn't think it was possible to go. She got accepted to UCLA.

"I thought I would just frame it and look at it as a reminder of what could have been," she says of her acceptance letter.

But Solís met other undocumented students who were earning their degrees and saw it was possible for her to do the same. Her experience has convinced her how important it is to speak out.

When she first found out about her status, Solís thought she just needed to go to city hall and take an oath to become a citizen. She thinks many people are similarly uninformed and if they knew more about the situation, they would change their minds.

"I know because I was on the other side," she says. "I used to just not care and think, 'Oh, why don't they get that taken care of?' So I know that a lot of this isn't hate so much as just not knowing."

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