

To the Carthage community –

“Do not talk about your status in school.”

My parents discouraged me from sharing my immigration status after I had applied to DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) in 2012 because they were fearful that I would be deported if someone found out I was an undocumented immigrant in the United States. Despite that fear, here I am sharing my story with you.

Many students who are DACA and undocumented have been in this country nearly their entire life; some only know the United States as their home. I arrived in the United States at the age of two. I did not come into this country through any extraordinary means like swimming across the Rio Grande, train-hopping or camping in deserts. I am not from Mexico or Latin American countries which are typically associated with the majority of undocumented immigrants in the United States.

The reality is that most of us arrive in the United States dreaming with our eyes wide open. In 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, I dreamed of not having to leave class in the middle of the day to learn English with the other ESL (English Second Language) students. In 6<sup>th</sup> grade, I dreamed of reading 60 books by the end of the year; I read 97. In 8<sup>th</sup> grade, I dreamed that my parents could spend less time at work and make it to one of my volleyball games. In 10<sup>th</sup> grade, I dreamed about being the first in my family to go to college. In 11<sup>th</sup> grade, I dreamed of getting my license and driving across the United States to attend college. It was during that time that those dreams came to a standstill.

During the winter of my junior year, I was sitting in the car with my dad who had picked me up after my driver's ed class. I could not stop talking about how excited I was to go get my license from the DMV. My dad was silent. I asked what was wrong and he held back his tears as he said,

“You can't get your license because you don't have a social security number or I.D. You're illegal here.”

My father was completely broken by having to tell me the truth about my immigration status in the United States in the middle of my college search. He had been hopeful that immigration reform would have gotten us on a path to citizenship by now. Approximately 65,000 undocumented high school students graduate every year, looking for a path into higher education with few resources. DACA and undocumented students cannot apply for federal financial aid (FAFSA) and I was also ineligible to work at the time because the DACA program had not come out yet. While my classmates were filling out the FAFSA during a high school class period, I was scrolling endlessly through scholarships looking for those that did not require a citizenship component to apply.

I was dreaming with my eyes wide open, having to face two realities: I did not exist in the United States and college was going to be nearly impossible to afford. I quickly learned that my accomplishments at that point did not matter. My 5.4 GPA with all advanced, honors, and International Baccalaureate (IB) classes, my leadership positions on two student councils, or my community projects could not change my eligibility for funding because I was here illegally. After one semester at my chosen college, I had to transfer because there was no way for me to continue. I moved to an entirely new city to find educational opportunities at a community college. While completing my degree as a full-time student

with scholarships, I worked full-time through my work permit under DACA. Being able to work was how I was able to afford some of the costs of attending college during and after that time.

An estimated 800,000 DACA students are searching for their place in institutions of higher education and the workforce with no path to citizenship.

DACA and undocumented Students are not anomalies. We are the students sitting among you in high school and college classrooms. We are your family, friends, and co-workers.

We are more than a status.

Sharing my journey is my choice with high hopes of encouraging discussions of what students like me need in higher education. I urge the Carthage community to proactively offer awareness, opportunities, and support for those of us whose dreams are built by our persistence to succeed.

Living outside of the shadows,

A Dreamer