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DACA Isn't an Option for Thousands of Immigrant Children. Why so Many Are Forced to Leave.

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When they were a year old, Julie Gras-Najjar and her twin sister Adèle moved to the United States from Montreal. When they were three years old, the family moved to Wilmington. They grew up there. Both girls attended UNC. All the while, their family waited for permanent residency status — their “green cards.” On their 21st birthday, the two women were forced to return to Canada, a country they only knew in infancy.

They had no choice: they were no longer lawful residents of the United States, even though their parents were still patiently waiting for the family to receive their permanent residency status. “I had exams that I was studying for while I was waiting at the border,” Gras-Najjar says. She remembers being depressed during this period.

Gras-Najjar’s father was an engineer. He is originally from Egypt but moved to Quebec to take a job at a nuclear power plant. He moved to the United States when he got a different job, the way any of us would move. He received a temporary work visa from the U.S. government, and the family entered the lottery for a green card. But Gras-Najjar and her sister are some of the 200,000 immigrants who came to the United States as children whose parents received a work visa, waited with their family for a green card, then “aged out” of their parents’ applications when they turned 21. Both sisters applied for student visas, and were able to finish school.

Afterward, they could try to get a work visa. Gras-Najjar ultimately got her green card through marriage. After her status changed, she was able to help secure her parents’ green cards, too. Adèle, on the other hand, had to leave the country 10 years ago. She still lives in Canada.

There has been a lot of political turmoil for recipients of DACA, or Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. Most recently, the Biden administration announced a plan to codify the program into law at the end of October. But since child immigrants like Gras-Najjar were “documented” through their parents’ work visas and green card applications, they aren’t eligible for the DACA program. The advocacy group Improve The Dream says that 99% of these immigrants pursue postsecondary education, and 87% of these college attendees pursue careers in STEM.

If the immigration process ran quicker, “aging out” wouldn’t be a concern — but it doesn’t. In March, libertarian thinktank Cato Institute estimated that 1.6 million family-sponsored immigrants would die before their applications were processed.

The struggle facing these “documented Dreamers” is an indictment of the process we use to keep others out. When anti-immigration politicians say people need to come in “the right way,” they fail to mention the reality of “the right way” — the years of waiting, the lottery and the cracks in the system, like self-deportations.

The dysfunction becomes a feature, not a bug, as a way to minimize the number of immigrants coming into the U.S. In the short term, Gras-Najjar and others in her position are pushing for Congress to fix the loophole through legislation. NC congresswoman Deborah Ross filed a bill last year that would keep them on their parents’ application after they turn 21 and “age out.” Improve the Dream is also pushing for these immigrants to be included in future DACA legislation. “My Wake County community is one of many across the country that has flourished because of immigrant workers, who spend years growing our economy and raising their children as Americans,” Ross said in a press release from July 2021. “It is unconscionable that when these children, known as Documented Dreamers, reach the age of 21, they can be forced to self-deport to countries they might not even remember.”

Long-term, however, there needs to be a closer inspection of the quotas for immigrants that haven’t changed since the 1990s, and there needs to be a way to clear the backlog of green card applications. “Republican-leaning voices will call for people to ‘follow the law’ and to ‘come here legally’ and to ‘wait for your documents,’” Gras-Najjar says, “and watching that as someone in my situation — it’s just frustrating because you can do that and still not be able to make it.”