

The Gazette

After a lifetime in Iowa, UI student dreams of staying in United States

James Lynch

July 2, 2021

Pareen Mhatre has lived in Iowa for nearly 21 years. But as she enters her final year at the University of Iowa, the biomedical engineering major fears she will have to win a lottery to stay in the United States.

“Even if I identify myself as an Iowan, I lack the sense of permanence and security,” Mhatre said Thursday.

She was just 4 months old when her parents brought her from India to Iowa City so they could attend the UI. Her father and mother, Girish and Sampada, are both UI staff members.

For most of her life, Mhatre has been on an H4 visa as a dependent of someone holding a U.S. visa. However, because she’s 21 and aging out of the immigration system, Mhatre must start the process of applying for an F1 student visa and then an H1B work visa, “which is essentially a lottery system.”

“Our existence in the country we think of as our home shouldn't come down to luck,” Mhatre told a U.S. House panel during a hearing on the introduction of bipartisan legislation, the [American Children Act](#), proposed to protect documented dependents of long-term nonimmigrant visa holders.

The current legal immigration system has disadvantaged children like her, Mhatre and members of groups advocating for Indian Americans told representatives, because once they turn 21 they lose their dependent status and must start the immigration process all over again.

“Or worse, self deport,” she added. “As documented Dreamers we face the prospect of having to return to our country of birth, which we barely know.”

Mhatre is among more than 200,000 documented Dreamers — children who were brought to the United States as children. Their parents entered the country legally on nonimmigrant visas such as H-1B, but their children have been excluded from proposed solutions for other Dreamers since

2017. Undocumented Dreamers are those who were children when their parents entered the county illegally and brought them along.

Based on research by the Cato Institute, there are an estimated 1,000 to 2,000 documented Dreamers in Iowa.

For Mhatre, the consequences go beyond being uprooted from her family and the country where she has grown up.

“The uncertainty surrounding my immigration situation has affected my mental health,” Mhatre told members of Congress, including U.S. Rep. Mariannette Miller-Meeks, an Ottumwa Republican who is one of the co-sponsors of the American Children Act.

She has struggled with depression, generalized anxiety and panic disorder because of the uncertainty over her immigration status, Mhatre said.

“Whether it came to my college plans or where I would move in the future, I always had to think of my immigration situation,” she said. “Because I didn't know that if I would be in this country with my parents after 21, or even after graduating college, it's still in the back of my mind.”

After graduating, Mhatre would like to work on advancements in the medical device field and help increase the quality of life for patients.

The proposed legislation would basically grant documented Dreamers like her permanent residency, which would provide a sense of security for her.

Miller-Meeks, who met with Mhatre in April while she was in Washington to testify at a House Judiciary Committee hearing, said the proposed legislation would close gaps in the immigration system by providing a pathway to permanent residency for individuals who were brought to the United States as dependent children of workers admitted under approved employer petitions, have maintained status in the United States for 10 years, including four years as a dependent, and have graduated from a higher education institution.

Earlier this year, Miller-Meeks opposed the American Dream and Promise Act. The broader legislation addressed, among other things, DACA — the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, a program reinstated by President Joe Biden that allows eligible undocumented immigrants brought to the United States as children to live and work here legally.

“We must ensure that our immigration system protects those who come here legally and supports them as they work to contribute to and improve our country,” Miller-Meeks said of the measure she is co-sponsoring. “These students grew up here, attended school here, and want to continue to make our country a better place. I am proud to support them.”