

# TwinCities BUSINESS

## Have We Forgotten How to Dream?

Vance K. Opperman

October 31, 2017

Dear Mr. Alger:

This letter is coming your way because there is a little bit of Horatio Alger in all of us; we are all just a little bit immigrant. We're willing to bet that grandfathers and great-grandfathers of most of the people reading this letter were inspired by the Horatio Alger story. We all know that story. (Many of us have lived it.) A young person (generally a boy) living in poverty or facing other hardships not of his choosing overcomes those handicaps through hard work to become highly successful. This is exactly the story of the beneficiaries of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), known as "Dreamers."

The first Dreamers were this country's founders, basing a new social order on the revolutionary idea that "all men are created equal" and that they had the inherent right to form a government dedicated to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." This founding ethos of the American republic required a revolution to be established.

When we have done violence to the American Dream, death and destruction has been the result. The Civil War was this. Americans whose forefathers were brought to this country against their will, in chains, have been too slowly welcomed by all parts of our society. But here, too, we have made great progress. It is totemic that Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech to the crowd gathered for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom will be forever known as "I Have a Dream." In the American character, all have that dream.

In the context of immigration, Dreamers are defined as those children who came to the United States before reaching their 16th birthday, who have continuously resided in the United States since 2007, who are here unlawfully, and who have not been convicted of a felony, a significant misdemeanor or three or more other misdemeanors. Dreamers must also be currently in school, have graduated or been honorably discharged from the armed forces. And they must be under the age of 31 as of June 2012. Thus, approximately 800,000 people, after vetting, have been allowed to attend school, get a work permit and pay taxes. They do not qualify for public welfare benefits. In most cases, Dreamers know only the English language and American culture, because the United States truly has been their home since they were very young.

When Americans dream, good things happen. Most economists believe that Dreamers benefit the overall U.S. economy. A study in the *Journal of Public Economics* found that DACA increased

labor force participation and decreased the unemployment rate for DACA-eligible immigrants. According to University of California-Davis economist Giovanni Peri, ending DACA would bring a net loss in productivity because the U.S. economy is close to full employment. (Minnesota's unemployment rate is currently 3.7 percent.) The Cato Institute has estimated that ending DACA would reduce economic growth by approximately \$280 billion over the next 10 years and reduce Social Security and Medicare tax revenue by \$24.6 billion. A Center for American Progress study estimated that U.S. GDP would be reduced by a total of \$460 billion over the next 10 years if DACA were repealed. Other studies have noted that the DACA population is involved in crime at a lower rate than the non-immigrant population generally. Remember that to be eligible under DACA, participants cannot have been convicted of three misdemeanors. How many readers of this column would fail that test?

Ninety-seven percent of all DACA recipients are currently employed or enrolled in school, with 72 percent of the top 25 Fortune 500 companies employing Dreamers. Ninety-one percent of DACA recipients are currently employed; among Dreamers ages 25 and older, employment jumps to 93 percent.

DACA recipients are employers. One survey found that 5 percent of DACA respondents have started their own business, and among Dreamers 25 or older, that percentage climbs to 8 percent. Contrast this to the American average of 3.1 percent. It is not much of a stretch to say the entire country's founding, and its foundation, rests on the success of immigrants.

In 1986, President Reagan granted a form of amnesty to approximately 3.1 million undocumented immigrants currently living within the United States (most of them from Mexico). In the current debate over DACA, no one hears references to this Reagan policy as having been a failure, or having led to higher unemployment or greater crime. And that is simply because all of the evidence points in the opposite direction.

Granting a path to citizenship to a large number of people who dream of becoming U.S. citizens has always been good for America. This is truly the American Dream and what sets us apart from other, less successful, societies.

That experience is exactly why so many people and groups from across America support extending DACA: President George W. Bush, President Clinton, President Obama, the pope, many religious organizations, the United States Chamber of Commerce, the Cato Institute, Mark Zuckerberg, Jamie Dimon, almost all the leading CEOs of Silicon Valley, and even the Koch brothers. We should, too.

We have a dream, and we should welcome all who wish to share that dream.