



Undocumented NIU students tell their stories

Kelly Bauer May 6, 2013

One of Ana's earliest memories is of crossing the border into the United States.

The NIU student was 5 years old when she immigrated with her mother. Her family hadn't originally planned to move. Her father left to work in the U.S. Ana couldn't eat. She asked for her father constantly. Her mother grew worried.

Ana and her mother attempted to cross the border but they were caught and sent back to Mexico three times. Ana can remember portions of the journey: staying in a hotel, waiting to move on; sitting with her mother in a van filled with people; crossing the border on foot as she traveled through the night with a group of other undocumented immigrants. She believes her parents paid the guides about \$5,000.

When their guides were nervous, everyone would have to drop and lie flat against the ground. The shadows from plants seemed to morph into monsters and scared her, Ana said. She could hear screaming as women were raped.

Why?

Another of Ana's earliest memories: living in Mexico before she immigrated and dreaming of her father, who was in the U.S. In her dreams, she said, she saw her father getting onto an airplane and leaving.

When she arrived in Illinois and saw him, he gave her a large, white stuffed animal. The family had sold Ana's dog in Mexico and he had promised her a replacement: the toy.

"But I wasn't mad at him," Ana said. "I was more happy to see him than anything else."

Another undocumented undergraduate NIU student, Ernesto, experienced a different journey when he moved to the U.S. Ernesto grew up in a small farming community: his family owned two or three cows and his father was a farmhand, his mother a seamstress. They left for the U.S. in February and Ernesto, 9 years old at the time, and his brother followed them after three months. Ernesto and his brother traveled in much the same way Melanie, an undergraduate NIU student, did: They were able to legally cross the U.S. border with visas. They never returned.

The Pew Hispanic Center, a branch of the non-partisan Pew Research Center, estimated there were 11.1 million undocumented immigrants in the U.S. in 2011. A little less than half of that population came as Ernesto and Melanie did, according to Pew.

All come for different reasons. Melanie's father wanted to pursue a master's degree in the United States. Ana's family was worried about the adverse reaction she had to her father's absence.

They do have similarities. All three said their parents moved to the U.S. so their children could have better opportunities. According to a 2012 study by the Pew Research Center, 53 percent of Mexican adults said they believed Mexicans who move to the U.S. have a better life there.

Melanie's father wanted to continue his education as his way of seeking that better life. In Mexico, he studied chemical engineering. She said her earliest memories are of being with her mother as her father studied.

In the United States, he works at a factory doing shipping and receiving work.

"Like everyone says, we were just going to come here for a while and leave after a certain amount of time," Melanie said. "Dad wanted to stay to learn English. But after a time, he wanted to get his master's and become a professor."

Melanie said her father's engineering degree "means nothing" in the United States, and her parents were unaware her father's credits wouldn't transfer over easily when they moved. Her father didn't think he would succeed in Mexico because it had a "very hard, very corrupt" system, she said.

Either way, Melanie said, her parents moved to benefit their children.

The Road to NIU

About 65,000 undocumented students who have lived in the United States for five years or longer graduate from high school each year, according to the College Board, a not-for-profit association. The board reports that undocumented students can legally attend most colleges, but "they are not eligible for most forms of financial aid."

When Ana was in high school, she was unsure if she could go to college. She met with a representative of NIU's Latino Resource Center and learned about the options available to undocumented students.

Members of DREAM Action NIU, a student organization that meets once every two weeks during the school year, also reach out to and help undocumented students. According to the organization's website, "Our members share the belief that higher education is a fundamental human right for all, regardless of citizenship status."

Melanie and Ernesto selected NIU because it was the "most affordable option." Ernesto transferred in from a community college and Melanie, who has two older sisters and knew undocumented students could attend public universities, started at NIU as a freshman in fall 2010.

Melanie, Ernesto and Ana--like all undocumented students in Illinois--are not eligible for the state's financial aid or student loans; however, they do pay in-state tuition, as was legalized by a 2003 Illinois law. An undocumented student who started at NIU in spring 2013 would pay about \$6,236 in tuition for 15 credit hours.

"The 10 states that, since 2001, have passed laws allowing undocumented students who graduate from in-state high schools to qualify for in-state college tuition have not experienced a large influx of new immigrant students who have displaced native-born students or added financial burdens to their education

systems,” according to the College Board. “In fact, these measures tend to increase school revenues by bringing in tuition from students who otherwise would not be in college.”

‘When It’s Not a Gift’

Because of their dependence on scholarship funds, the three must keep their GPA up and are active in student organizations.

Melanie said she has taken only four courses a semester because she can’t afford more. Her parents paid for her first year, but since then she has paid for NIU with scholarship money. Ernesto said he works over the summer and on weekends, receives financial help from his parents, and utilizes scholarship money and NIU’s payment plan in order to make his way through college. Ana also uses scholarships and has been helped by her parents.

“You want to get good grades because you want a scholarship,” Ernesto said. “But you also want to take advantage of it [education]. I don’t want to pick an easy elective--I picked a 300-level business class. And if I’m not doing OK, I work to the end and try to do the best.”

Melanie, who has a 4.0 GPA, said she has been given about \$20,000 in scholarships and stipend money from the programs with which she is involved. She said “NIU offers so many things,” but her college experience has not been perfect.

“I can’t do study abroad,” Melanie said. “If I would have, I’d be further in my educational experience, I guess you could say.”

Melanie is unable to participate in study abroad because she risks not being allowed back into the United States if she leaves.

Ana has also coped with challenges unique to undocumented students: Fear and uncertainty. She wanted to study nursing but, after arriving at NIU, heard her “records” would be checked as a nursing student. Months later, she learned she is able to study nursing, and she is changing her major accordingly.

All three plan to pursue an education after they finish their undergraduate studies.

“I’m going to do grad school, probably here, for accounting,” Ernesto said. “My mom, when she was younger, it was something she wanted to do. She never had the opportunity. She never finished high school. She had no chance to do that.”

He believes other students may not always need to study or work as hard because they have access to more financial aid options.

“Have you ever heard when people say, ‘You’ll take better care of your things when it’s not a gift?’”

The Future of Immigration

“...The time has come for common-sense, comprehensive immigration reform,” said President Barack Obama in January. “...We have an immigration system that’s out of date and badly broken; a system that’s holding us back instead of helping us grow our economy and strengthen our middle class.”

Melanie, Ernesto and Ana also want immigration reform, but United States politicians have been unable to agree on a path to that reform. Some have argued that there should be an amnesty that would make undocumented immigrants citizens.

Melanie said an amnesty would be “great” and provide the United States with “a lot more future leaders;” however, even the students are divided on reform. Ernesto pointed to the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. About 3 million undocumented immigrants were given legal status by the law, but problems with the United States’ immigration process have returned.

“If it had been a good fix, this wouldn’t have happened again,” Ernesto said.

Jim DeMint, Heritage Foundation president and former South Carolina Republican senator, said Sunday that implementing proposed immigration reform would “cost Americans trillions of dollars.” In April, Alex Nowrasteh of the Cato Institute wrote that a study DeMint’s Heritage Foundation produced in 2007 had “flawed methodology [that] produced a grossly exaggerated cost to federal taxpayers of legalizing unauthorized immigrants while undercounting or discounting their positive tax and economic contributions.”

While the debates continue, the estimated 11.1 million undocumented immigrants in the United States live in fear of legal troubles. They also go about their daily lives: Eat, go to sleep, go to school, work. In late November, they should be able to receive special driver’s licenses, the result of a state law approved by Gov. Pat Quinn in January.

Being undocumented has not been able to hold back people like Ana, Ernesto and Melanie. Ernesto purchased a \$200 fake social security card while in high school so he could work. He hopes to help out his parents financially when he graduates, especially because he has a younger brother who will one day go to school.

“We could be the future but they’re not letting us,” Melanie said.

‘This is a Better Place’

When Melanie crossed the border, it was in a car. She had her sisters, her parents and whatever else could fit. They drove for three days.

They arrived at their new home in Illinois on the 4th of July.

Melanie can remember getting out of the car. Above her, fireworks lit up the sky. They had always scared her before, but now the red, white and blue sparks made her excited (“so dramatic,” she teased when telling the story). She was 5 or 6 years old.

Melanie said she knew one thing about her future: “It was a symbol of, ‘This is a better place.’”