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In Arizona, young illegal immigrants battle governor's policy

Illegal immigrants in Arizona are joining forces to protest Gov. Jan Brewer's order to ignore a federal program giving them benefits such as driver's licenses.

By John M. Glionna, Los Angeles Times

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PHOENIX — Lilia Romo will tell you plainly: She didn't ask for this fight, but now that the immigration war has been declared in this politically conservative state, the confident 24-year-old says she intends to win it.

Romo was brought to the U.S. from Mexico by people her mother hired 20 years ago. All she recalls about the adventure is that the man who drove her illicitly across the border plied her and her two cousins with candy to keep them quiet.

The native of Sonora, Mexico, is among an estimated 80,000 young illegal immigrants in Arizona — and about 1.8 million nationwide — who could receive work permits and two years of deferred deportation status under a new federal immigration program designed to assist young immigrants such as Romo who were smuggled into the U.S. as children.

Romo runs an English as a second language school in Phoenix with her 43-year-old mother, a former nurse in Mexico, and plans to attend university this fall. Her goal is to work as a pediatrician in Arizona's poorest neighborhoods. The new program, which started Aug. 15, would allow those who qualify to obtain a Social Security number, apply for a driver's license, open a bank account and other important benefits.

But Romo lives in Arizona and says she feels like a pawn in a political chess match between the Obama administration and Jan Brewer, the Republican governor of a state with one of the nation's toughest anti-immigration laws.

Under the program, known as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, illegal immigrants younger than 31 who came to the U.S. before age 16 are eligible if they are enrolled in school, graduated from high school or served in the U.S. armed forces, and have no criminal record, among other criteria.

But Brewer signed an executive order directing Arizona state agencies to deny driver's licenses and other public benefits to illegal immigrants here even though they qualify for the Obama program. No federal program, the governor says, gives undocumented immigrants legal status in her state.

So Romo is fighting back. She's joining hundreds of other young Latino activists volunteering at the Arizona Dream Act Coalition to raise funds and rally support to protest the governor's actions. "I want to ask the governor, 'Aren't all human beings equal in this country?' And if so, why is she treating us this way?" Romo said.

There is no love lost between President Obama and Brewer, as illustrated in January by a much publicized tarmac tiff, when the governor pointed a finger in the president's face during a minute-long private standoff just after Air Force One had touched down in Arizona.

The acrimony over immigration policy persists. Now, for the second time in three months — after the Supreme Court in June upheld a key element of Arizona's controversial SB 1070 immigration law — state and federal governments have come to an impasse, with both sides trading barbs.

Brewer has labeled the Obama program "backdoor amnesty," as well as blatant political pandering to the Latino vote during a presidential election year. And she says that constituents back her stance: In the last 10 years, voters have twice approved laws denying illegal immigrants state services, unless mandated by the federal government.

Critics denounce Brewer's move as bullying defenseless young people. Carmen Cornejo, a volunteer for the Arizona Dream Act Coalition, called the governor's executive order "shameless political theater" that has become an all-too-regular occurrence.

"It's been a political sport in Arizona to kick young immigrants," she said. "They're young, brown, mostly Mexican kids. They're an easy target for cheap political points, and Gov. Brewer ought to be ashamed of herself."

Brewer's office says the matter is simple: Illegal immigrants are not considered citizens under Arizona law, no matter what Washington says, adding that the Obama administration has declined to clarify how its new program makes things any different.

"The line here is whether these people have an authorized federal presence in this country, and we don't believe they do," said Matthew Benson, a spokesman for Brewer. "A week after the governor's order, the Department of Homeland Security has still not come out publicly to say 'Arizona, you're wrong — these people have an authorized presence.' They've danced around it. They've done everything but confirm it."

And he fired back at critics who say Brewer is picking on young Latinos: "If you're not on strong legal footing, the best you can do is call names. We're 'racists.' We're 'bigots.' And that's simply not true."

Homeland Security Department spokesman Peter Boogaard called the agency's deferred program a temporary measure but declined to respond to Arizona's interpretation of the act. He said the department didn't "comment on state-specific matters."

For young illegal immigrants such as Romo, the deferred deportation program would, at least temporarily, mean less tiptoeing through life. Her mother worries, Romo says, whenever she sees a patrol cruiser. She tells Romo to pull over and let the officer pass.

A slight woman with pulled-back brown hair, Romo says she needs her car to drive her 17-year-old brother to and from high school as well as report to her teaching job. "I hate being on the wrong side of the law," she said. "But I'll do it if it means getting my brother to school. It seems silly not to."

As a child, Romo says, she was ashamed of her illegal status. But years of existing beneath the social and legal radar in Arizona have made her all the more eager to reap the benefits of the federal program.

"The constant pressure from the state government has made young Latinos like me learn how to become a fighter," Romo said. "We're at ground zero of the immigration battle. Young kids from other states look at us and say, 'I wouldn't be able to handle living in Arizona.' But even when things look their worst, we're still fighting, still educating, still organizing."

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