

As Obama policy kicks in, young illegal immigrants set to apply for deportation reprieve

By Susan Carroll

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Raul Amador Sr. grimaced as he watched his first-born son skillfully run a mop with smooth, even strokes over the floor at a construction job site.

There is no shame in it, the father reminded himself, turning his back and hoping his son, 25-year-old Raul Jr., had missed the fleeting expression.

Raul Jr.'s mother has caught her mind wandering, at times, when she works alongside Raul Jr. at a local gym, wiping other people's sweat off exercise machines and scrubbing toilets.

"If only they knew . . .," Ofelia Amador would say to herself, thinking of some of the people at the gym who pass them in the hall as if they were invisible.

If only they knew that Raul Jr., the young man with the mop, had an undergraduate degree in prosthetics and orthotics from the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas. If only they knew, she thought, that he was in his second year of his Ph.D. studies in kinesiology at the University of Houston.

More than two decades after Raul Jr.'s parents carried him across the border from Mexico, he will finally have his chance to trade his mop for a white lab coat, to work legally in the U.S. He and more than a million other young, illegal immigrants on Wednesday will become eligible to apply for deferred action, a temporary reprieve from deportation, and for a work permit. The permits and temporary status would last for two years and then could be renewed.

The policy change by the Obama administration has roiled many Republicans and border control advocates, who have called it an end-run around Congress. But the move has proved popular with key constituents, including Latino leaders who previously blasted the president for record-setting deportation numbers and failure to push through comprehensive immigration reform.

For Raul Jr., the new policy means he is finally able to start planning for his future - albeit in two-year increments.

Over the years, he reassured his mother and father that he was proud to do manual labor, that he liked working with his hands. But he quietly longed to be more like his friends, to be able to earn a paycheck working on campus, instead of scraping by as a janitor and construction worker.

He dreamed of picking his mother up from work, of driving his girlfriend on a date, without fearing that he would be stopped by police and deported. Deferred action would mean he could finally stop looking over his shoulder, he said.

"I don't know what it is like to not have to worry about that stuff," he said. "I've always had to live in fear. I've never really learned what it is to be free."

Miraculous birth

The doctor in the [Mexico City hospital](#) delivered the news with cold certainty. Her baby had died in utero. Ofelia rubbed her swollen belly and swore she felt a kick.

"It is not possible," she told the doctor.

The baby is dead, the doctor replied. She cried and prayed to God and to the Virgin of Guadalupe, begging and bargaining. "If you let him live," she prayed, "I promise to guide him to be a good person."

Raul Jr. was born alive but sickly. Over the next two years, he spent time in doctor's offices and hospitals for a stomach ailment and then a series of infections.

His father, who graduated from high school and went to trade school to learn how to fix typewriters, found he was unable to afford the mounting medical bills. A doctor in Mexico City suggested they take Raul Jr. to Houston, saying they could find the best doctors there.

Raul Sr. started talking to a friend in California, who told him there was plenty of work, to come north. After a three-month stint working in California, Raul Sr. returned home to Mexico City, and he and his wife crossed the border illegally with their ailing 2-year-old son, bound for Houston.

The family settled into a southwest Houston apartment complex, and within days, Raul Jr. had learned how to say, "Do you want to play?" in English. He had a simple surgery to correct his medical problems, and made friends easily, excelling in school.

The small family grew, with the birth of a daughter and then another son, both U.S. citizens. It became clear to Raul Jr.'s parents that the children's schools were rough and getting rougher. They started thinking about a move to suburbia, and when Raul Jr. was about to enter sixth grade, they rented an apartment in Katy.

Raul Jr. walked into his gifted English class on the first day of school, noting that nearly all of the other students were white. The teacher looked up at him and said: "This isn't ESL (English As a Second Language)."

He flushed.

"I think I'm in your class," he said quietly.

She rechecked the roster as he slunk away to a seat.

Raul Jr. made new friends in Katy, but kept them at a distance. When he turned 15, his classmates started talking about getting their licenses and driving. He started making excuses. When they invited him to go to the mall to pick up job applications, he'd say he was busy, or that he was just going to work for his dad.

Raul Jr. studied hard, often staying up late into the night. His mother would sit with him at their kitchen table, thumbing through the Bible, looking for words of inspiration. It was never a question of "if" he would go to college, always a given, he said, a matter of "when."

"Be patient," his mother said. "The day will come when you will see the results of your hard work."

'I believe in you'

When it came time to apply for college, Raul Jr. worried about how he would afford it. He confided about his undocumented status to his guidance counselor in Katy, but she seemed ignorant of how to help.

He spent hours researching on the Internet. His mother's friend put him in touch with an undocumented student who went to UH, and she connected him with a UH guidance counselor.

During his senior year, UH offered Raul Jr. a full ride to study biomedical engineering.

He graduated from high school with honors. His father cried in the stands at his graduation.

At UH, Raul Jr. found that he liked his major, but he didn't love it. He transferred to UT Southwestern in Dallas to study prosthetics and orthotics.

He met a young woman there, [Hope Whitten](#), a Chicago native who was pretty and smart and kind. But he didn't ask her out, fearing he would eventually have to tell her he was undocumented. After about six months, he changed his mind, and they saw a zombie movie and had coffee on their first date. Six months into their relationship, he shared his secret about being undocumented.

She asked a lot of questions, and then told him she loved him.

"I believe in you," she said. "I will be there for you."

Finally feeling free

They talked about marriage, knowing it could help fix his immigration problem. But he refused.

"That's not the way I want to do this," he said. "I don't want you to think that's why I'm with you."

They graduated from UT Southwestern, and she went on to work in prosthetics in Houston. Last year, Raul Jr. started on his doctorate at UH.

On June 15, he returned home after working in the summer heat at a construction site with his father and turned on the TV He watched, transfixed, as President [Barack Obama](#) announced the new policy, realizing that a work permit would allow him to work on campus at UH, to quit the gym and other side jobs.

Raul Jr. knew it would not be a permanent fix, and would not offer a path toward a green card or citizenship. With a change in policy or administration, he could find himself in a few years back to mopping floors and checking for flashing lights in his rearview mirror.

But he eventually put the doubts aside and asked Hope out for a date night. He felt happy, he said. He felt free.

<http://www.chron.com/news/houston-texas/article/As-Obama-policy-kicks-in-young-illegal-3781703.php>