

DREAMers personalize cases to stall deportation

By Alan Gomez, USA TODAY

Growing up in [Ann Arbor](#), Mich., Mohammad Abdollahi was given the same guidance that countless parents of illegal immigrants have told their children — don't tell anyone how you came into the country.

Abdollahi's parents immigrated to the [U.S.](#) from Iran on a student visa when he was 3, but did not return when the visa expired, so the entire family was living in the U.S. illegally. Abdollahi heeded his parents advice, until two years ago when he felt they were getting close to being deported.

That's when Abdollahi did the unthinkable — he got himself arrested during a May 2010 protest of immigration policies and had a friend alert immigration officials of the arrest. He figured that if his case was made public, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officials would be hard-pressed to deport him.

"We realized that the more public we are with our stories, the safer we are," said Abdollahi, 26. After he publicly told his story, his lawyer received a call from an immigration official who said the agency wasn't pursuing deportation, he said.

Abdollahi now works for the National Immigrant Youth Alliance, one of several groups that help young illegal immigrants facing deportation by publicizing their cases. The young illegal immigrants are known generally as DREAMers after the [DREAM Act](#), legislation that has failed several times in Congress that would legalize some illegal immigrants brought to the U.S. as children.

The latest example came last week, when North Miami Senior High School valedictorian Daniela Pelaez was facing the threat of being deported to her home country of Colombia. More than 2,500 classmates held a rally at her school on March 2, the same day her attorney sent ICE a request for a reprieve accompanied by letters of support from Republican Reps. [Ileana Ros-Lehtinen](#) and David Rivera of Miami.

On March 6, Pelaez's attorney received an e-mail from ICE saying Pelaez had been granted a two-year deferment on her deportation.

ICE officials deny that the publicity of any case, including Pelaez's, affects whether they push for deportation. Instead, ICE spokeswoman Barbara Gonzalez said they simply adhere to ICE guidelines to focus on illegal immigrants who pose threats to national security, have been convicted of crimes in the U.S., are recent border-crossers and repeat immigration law violators.

"ICE takes discretionary actions based solely on the merits of a case regardless of publicity," Gonzalez said.

Immigration attorneys disagree, saying that ICE continues targeting students who would be eligible for legal status under the DREAM Act.

"I've had clients approached by ICE officers in detention who essentially told them, 'The only way you're getting out of this is if the media picks up on it,' " said David Bennion, a Philadelphia immigration attorney.

The infrastructure behind the publicity machine has grown rapidly in recent years.

When Gaby Pacheco's family was arrested by immigration officials during an early-morning raid in 2006, she remembers struggling to contact friends, local politicians and community organizers to alert them.

Now, Pacheco runs the website EndOurPain.com, that screens cases of people facing deportation to help them get publicity around their case. Pacheco has a 30-person team of volunteers and access to pro bono immigration attorneys to plot out publicity strategies in each case.

Dulce Guerrero runs a similar program in Georgia, where she uses social media networks to alert hundreds of people to flood ICE with phone calls on behalf of people they think should not be deported. Other groups organized "National Coming Out of the Shadows Week," which is running this week and features events around the country where illegal immigrants "out" themselves in public.

While Congress has been unable to tackle comprehensive immigration legislation that would address the status of the country's 11 million illegal immigrants, some members of Congress are also helping DREAMers win reprieves from immigration officials.

Sen. [Dick Durbin](#), D-Ill., a long-time sponsor of the DREAM Act, dedicates one speech on the Senate floor almost every week to highlight the credentials of an illegal immigrant who would qualify for the act. Durbin said legislators who have long opposed the act are coming around in recent years as they hear the firsthand accounts of DREAMers.

"These DREAMers stepping out, identifying themselves and speaking to members of Congress are making it personal," Durbin said. "It's absolutely essential they continue to do it."

Steven Camarota, director of research at the Center for Immigration Studies, a group that opposes the DREAM Act, said the infrastructure being built to publicize deportation cases shows that the outcry garnered is, "not a spontaneous reaction to an individual case, but part of a concerted and organized effort to get the most sympathetic illegal immigrant into the public discourse."

"Sure, it's a very effective political strategy," Camarota said. "But a lot of people, even some legal immigrants, are very resentful. It may endear as many people as it upsets."

The only reservations that organizers have is that untold number of illegal immigrants don't benefit from the strategy. The Obama administration has set a record each year with the number of people it deports — nearly 400,000 in 2011 — and they believe countless people who would qualify for the DREAM Act are among those.

<http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/story/2012-03-12/dream-act-illegal-immigration/53502528/1>