

For mixed-status families, U.S. immigration reform would end anxiety



Tim Gaynor August 10, 2013

By Tim Gaynor

PHOENIX (Reuters) - U.S.-born Junnyor Diaz studies at a Phoenix high school. His Mexico-born older brother, Edder, has applied for a program to avoid deportation, while their undocumented mother, Angelica, cleans houses to keep the family fed and, above all, together.

They are among millions of families across the United States made up of citizens, so-called Dreamers and immigrants without legal status who are hopeful that a comprehensive immigration overhaul might finally simplify their lives.

The U.S. Senate passed a sweeping bill backed by President Barack Obama in June that offers a pathway to citizenship for many of the country's 11 million illegal immigrants, but the Republican-led House of Representatives opposes it.

For Junnyor and 16 million others like him in mixed-status families, reform could bring stability to a fraught situation in which a U.S.-born child is a citizen with a shot at a university education and a stable working life, while a sibling or parent born abroad can face instability and deportation.

"There isn't a day that goes by that I don't worry for either my brother or my mother," said Junnyor, a basketball-loving 16-year-old whose childhood in Phoenix has been filled with anxiety. "I just want it to go away."

The family's complex life began when Angelica slipped over the porous border from Mexico with then 4-year-old Edder in 1995 in search of a better life in Arizona. She quickly found work washing dishes and enrolled Edder in school. A year later, Junnyor was born a U.S. citizen.

Edder, now 23, acquired English swiftly, but he faced challenges on graduating high school in 2007. Despite grades that got him into a pre-law course at Arizona State University, he faced hefty international student fees because of his status.

"We were having to pay three times as much as any other student," Edder said. Ineligible for student loans and financial aid, he dropped out after a year.

His difficulties came amid a backlash from anti-illegal immigration activists and sweeps for the undocumented by a tough local sheriff, Joe Arpaio.

TERRIFYING ARREST

In 2010, a state law was passed requiring police to question those they stopped and suspected of being in the country illegally about their immigration status. That year, Edder was detained after he and a U.S.-born friend took an illegal shortcut across the tracks of a light rail network.

"They let him go ... but the police came, handcuffed me and arrested me," he said.

After being interviewed by federal immigration police, he was sent to the Eloy Detention Center in the desert southeast of Phoenix and placed in deportation proceedings.

"I was terrified ... my family is here, my life is here," he said. "It was nothing I had ever experienced before." It took Angelica two months to scrape together the \$12,500 bond to secure Edder's release to a family transformed by the experience.

With limited work and study options, Edder threw himself into community activism in Phoenix, registering Latinos to vote in local and presidential elections.

Junnyor joined him canvassing door to door during his school vacation, becoming more aware of the opportunities and the responsibilities that befall the only citizen in the family.

"My brother had to go through all that stuff (but) I can do whatever I want," Junnyor said. Two years from high school graduation, he has already sounded out several colleges about studying medicine and wants to become a pediatrician.

"I want to make my mother proud, I want to make my brother proud, I want to make myself proud," he said.

While the Senate passed an immigration overhaul, House Republicans are divided over the granting of legal status to those in the country illegally, a step many see as rewarding lawbreakers.

With the fate of the legislation now uncertain, the Diaz family remains hopeful for even incremental changes to the immigration system. After a lifetime of uncertainty, Junnyor is impatient to put the travails of mixed status behind them.

"It's not just me, there's millions of families across the nation who just hope that this whole thing just goes away."

<http://news.yahoo.com/mixed-status-families-u-immigration-reform-end-anxiety-134750304.html>