

Mexican immigrant with NYC law degree is in limbo

By CLAUDIA TORRENS Associated Press

NEW YORK—A Mexican immigrant who passed the New York bar exam last year cannot work as a lawyer because he was brought to the U.S. illegally as a child, and his situation could soon become part of a national debate.

Cesar Vargas was 5 years old when he arrived from Puebla, Mexico, with his mother in 1990. He's now a 28-year-old City University of New York law graduate and said he is waiting to see how courts in California and Florida decide two similar cases involving Mexican immigrants.

While in college, he knew that because of his status, he would not enjoy the high salary and prestige of a law firm. But he decided to take up law anyway.

"I always wanted to go to school; I always loved to learn," Vargas said. "In high school when I was told I could not go to college because of my status, it was something that really struck me. It made me want to fight more."

Vargas has founded DRM Capitol Group, a lobbying firm pushing for the approval of the Dream Act, a federal bill that would pave the path to citizenship for immigrant children illegally brought to the United States by their parents.

The California state Supreme Court is set to decide whether to deny an applicant, Sergio Garcia, a law license solely on the basis of his immigration status. Garcia is a Mexican immigrant who was brought illegally to the United States by his parents when he was 17 months old.

William Chiang, a spokesman for the State Bar of California, said he couldn't comment.

In a similar case in Florida, Jose Manuel Godinez-Samperio is waiting for a court decision on whether to grant him a license that would allow him to practice law in that state.

Immigrants who live illegally in the United States do not have access to federal grants to attend college.

Godinez-Samperio was born in Hidalgo, Mexico, and came to the United States when he was 9. He graduated from Florida State University Law School in May and has passed the bar exam.

"It is frustrating to me. On one hand, I feel an outpouring of support from a lot of people, and that is a very good feeling. But on the other hand, I am also disheartened that this issue even comes up," he said. "I am a dreamer. I was a child when I came to this country."

Vargas said he is going to wait for the outcome of the cases, which could determine his future and that of other immigrants who live illegally in the country and graduate from law school.

The New York State Board of Law Examiners confirmed Vargas passed the bar exam in November.

Vargas said he was able to pay for school because CUNY helped him through a private fund. He also got a scholarship from the Puerto Rican Bar Association and accepted donations and his family's help. He worked part-time at a restaurant, seven days a week.

"It was very difficult. It was a challenge," said Vargas, who worked as an intern for the Brooklyn district's attorney office, the state Supreme Court and former Congressman Anthony Weiner.

Vargas is now working on his application to register as a lawyer in New York. The state's Court of Appeals asks applicants to state whether they are citizens, residents or have a visa. Vargas said he will have to mark the "other" category.

He would like to become an immigration lawyer in his own firm or work for a nonprofit. In the meantime, he is organizing protests in favor of the Dream Act.

"We need to step out of the shadows," Vargas said. "That's the only way we can tell our stories."

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