

August 28, 2012

Reprieve from deportation frees American DREAMers

By JEROME R. STOCKFISCH

Worst of all is the lying.

Having no ID to show for an R-rated movie stinks. Holing up at home instead of socializing with friends, in the drawn-out parlance of the young, "*suuucks* ."

But when friends wonder why Claudia Jimenez isn't preparing for college, she invents complications with phantom scholarships. They ask why she isn't driving. "I would blame it on my parents," she says. "I would tell them, 'They don't let me drive, they're super-strict.'"

"I would always do that. Just to get it off my back, you know? It's constant lying. Constant."

Jimenez doesn't have to lie any more. The 19-year-old from New Port Richey is among an estimated 7,600 young people in the Tampa area who have applied for "deferred action," an Obama administration policy that eliminates the threat of deportation for those who were brought into the country illegally as children.

In June, President Barack Obama's executive order of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals was an audacious move, illustrating a widening gap – more like a chasm – between Democrats and Republicans on illegal immigration.

The move brought cheers from the Latino community, but condemnation from Republicans who said the president overstepped his bounds after Congress had stymied similar legislation.

At stake in the immigration debate is the future of an estimated 12 million people here illegally. Obama's program would affect anywhere from 1.4 million to 1.7 million young men and women nationwide, an estimated 60,000 in Florida.

They are people like Jimenez, who speaks clear and fluent English. She has graduated from high school in the top third of her class. She wants to study child psychology. With a little remorse, she touts another skill:

"Unfortunately," she says, "I've become a very good liar."

* * * * *

The Republican National Convention in Tampa this week highlights not only the rift between Democrats and Republicans on the issue of immigration, but a divide within the GOP itself.

It was in 2001 that lawmakers took a serious shot at reform, tackling the first Development Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act, or DREAM Act. The legislation was introduced by Sen. Orrin Hatch, a Republican from Utah, and Sen. Richard Durbin, a Democrat from Illinois. It had support in both parties, but not enough to pass.

The ensuing years saw tweaking of the legislation, and a steady withdrawal of Republican support. More recently, conservatives have attempted to block any reform that would provide a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants.

In 2010, another DREAM Act was introduced. It passed the House, which was then controlled by Democrats, but the GOP minority in the Senate was able to launch a filibuster the Democrats couldn't hurdle.

On June 15 this year, Obama announced he would implement a key portion of the DREAM Act by executive order. The country's immigration law enforcement would focus on the removal of those who pose a natural security or public safety risk and those who have committed crimes. Those 15 to 30 years of age would be eligible for a two-year reprieve of deportation and documentation that would allow them to work in this country.

"The bill hasn't really changed," Obama said in his announcement. "The need hasn't changed. It's still the right thing to do. The only thing that has changed, apparently, was the politics."

Now, Republicans are scrambling to counter, and launching charges of election-year politics of their own.

Presumptive GOP president nominee Mitt Romney told an Orlando audience of Latino elected and appointed officials in June that Obama did nothing on immigration "until facing a tough re-election and trying to secure your vote."

Romney has said that as president he would veto the DREAM Act, insisting immigration reform would take "a long-term solution." His proposals on immigration include raising caps on visas for science and technology workers, completing a high-tech fence on the border, and no amnesty.

Obama's deferred action program appears in jeopardy should Romney take the White House. In Orlando, he told the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials: "Some people have asked if I will let stand the president's executive action. The answer is that I will put in place my own long-term solution that will replace and supersede the president's temporary measure."

Last week, GOP strategists established the party's platform, which will be voted on this week by the full convention. It largely mirrors Romney's stance. But the platform committee also encourages state efforts to reduce immigration, a nod to an Arizona law seen by Hispanics as discriminatory, and it opposes in-state tuition for illegal immigrants as well as "sanctuary cities" whose policies restrict police from enforcing immigration laws.

Hispanic and immigration activists have characterized the GOP position as outright hostility.

Frank Sharry, executive director of American Voice, a group calling for immigration reform with a focus in citizenship, said the Republican Party "has lurching to the right on this issue," driven by hard-liners such as Kris Kobach, Kansas secretary of state and co-author of the Arizona law. Kobach sat on the GOP platform committee in Tampa last week.

"I find it remarkable that the party is so tethered to such a minority within the party," Sharry said. "I get it that in a low-turnout primary, it can make a big difference. But by the time they get to the general election, they look horribly out of touch with the values and contributions of Hispanics. And they make it extremely difficult or impossible for them to regain the White House.

"'We don't like you, but we want you to vote for us' has never been a successful method of outreach," he said.

* * * * *

At a gym near his New Port Richey home, Dominik Fodor trains with a friend and admits he's feeling a lot better about life since he applied for deferred action on Aug. 15 – the first day applications were accepted.

Fodor was brought here by his parents from Budapest, Hungary, in 1999. His young life has been filled with tension.

He doesn't drive. He can't work. "You try not to stress about the situation," he says. "But you never know. You could get pulled over with a friend, and they're, like, 'Oh, why are you here?' Very scary."

Not surprisingly, both Fodor and Jimenez said if they could, they would vote or campaign for Obama this fall. On a larger scale, the leanings of Hispanic voters nationwide could be a problem for Republicans on Election Day.

Immigration tied with health care and unemployment as top priorities among Hispanics in a recent Gallup/USA Today poll, with all three earning 20 percent responses. Just 8 percent of all U.S. adults listed immigration as their main concern, far behind health care, economic growth, the deficit and unemployment.

That translates to an Obama lead of 66 percent to 25 percent among Hispanics, with 9 percent undecided, according to the June 25 poll.

There is obviously a lot on the line this November for the two young Tampa area immigrants, but they say they're trying not to sweat it. Using almost identical language, both say they are tempering their excitement over reprieves from deportation.

"I always said to my mom, until I have everything in my hand – work permit, Social Security, driver's license – that is the day I will celebrate," says Jimenez. "Not right now."

Adds Fodor: "I'm still not too excited, but once the papers are in my hand, and I have what I need, I'll be very excited."

From an adjacent treadmill in the New Port Richey fitness center, his friend, Mike Amato, 17, puts the issue into more age-appropriate perspective: "Then he can start driving *me* around."

<http://www2.tbo.com/news/republican-national-convention/2012/aug/28/young-immigrants-pin-dreams-on-hope-deferred-immig-ar-475667/>