

Silicon Valley steps up role in immigration debate

Carla Marinucci

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Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg - one of the world's richest tech innovators - will break new ground next month by speaking publicly for the first time on a political issue when he delivers an address on immigration reform in San Francisco at the West Coast premiere of a film about undocumented immigrants.

Zuckerberg's Aug. 5 appearance at the [Yerba Buena Center for the Arts](#), where "Documented" will be shown, will also mark the entrance by Silicon Valley, which previously has been mostly concerned with obtaining visas for foreign high-tech workers, into the wider debate on immigration.

"It's a dramatic move, and it tells you we're at a critical moment in this issue - it's all hands on deck," said immigration activist [Jose Antonio Vargas](#), who wrote and directed the film, which details his experience as an immigrant living illegally in the U.S.

The film about undocumented immigrants includes stories of some of the estimated 1.4 million youth brought to this country by undocumented parents. They are known as Dreamers because they fit the requirements of the Dream Act, which would give legal status to minors who graduate from high school and eventually gain permanent residency if they go to college or serve in the military.

The San Francisco event is co-sponsored by Fwd.us, the issue advocacy group Zuckerberg founded with his former Harvard roommate [Joe Green](#), and Define American, the immigration rights campaign founded by Vargas.

Zuckerberg, 29, the world's youngest billionaire, is sure to be a hot ticket, and the invitation-only showing of the film is expected to draw an unusual mix of people.

Organizers say it will include Silicon Valley tech stars along with dozens of Asian and Latino youths brought to this country as children - the Dreamers - and Mexican day laborers from the South Bay.

The human face

Vargas, 32, who was born in the Philippines and came to the Bay Area as a boy, said Define American intends to invite key legislators - including Rep. [Steven King](#) of Iowa, a Republican who this week said that "for every valedictorian" among the Dreamers there are "another hundred" who are smuggling huge quantities of marijuana across the border.

"From the beginning, we have said this is not about Republicans and [Democrats](#)," Vargas said in an interview Thursday. "It's about trying to put a human face on this issue."

He said the effort will focus on pushing legislators on Capitol Hill to support comprehensive immigration changes. The Senate has passed such a bill, but [House Republicans](#) are dealing with the legislation one piece at a time.

"We need to do something to bring it all together," Vargas, a former Chronicle intern and Washington Post reporter, said.

Uniting Zuckerberg and Vargas at the same event signals that Silicon Valley players are stepping up their push for overhauling immigration, political observers say.

New coalitions

"Mark Zuckerberg is the most popular CEO in the country, a guy who doesn't play politics," said [Frank Sharry](#), executive director of America's Voice, a leading immigration advocacy organization based in Washington. "And he's saying that on this issue, 'We're going to innovate and be creative.' "

Sharry said new coalitions that include evangelicals, agricultural interests, immigrant and civil rights groups, and businesses including those in Silicon Valley, are an example of the "impressive depth and breadth across the political spectrum" demanding reforms now.

"And now, in the center, there's high tech - and the high-profile players are getting involved in a whole new way," Sharry added.

Wade Randlett, a Democratic political consultant in Silicon Valley and one of President Obama's biggest fundraising bundlers, said that by taking a role in the debate, Zuckerberg is being especially savvy because it expands the Silicon Valley push for bipartisan immigration reform beyond H-1B visas for highly skilled immigrants.

"It's really important to have people speak out about things that are not immediately in their financial interest," Randlett said. Undocumented day laborers, he added, are not necessarily future Facebook employees or investors, but supporting them "helps cement the coalition" pushing for immigration change.

The move is also "a smart pivot back" for Zuckerberg's nonpartisan advocacy group, which made a bad "stumble out of the block" earlier this year, Randlett said.

Fwd.us was hit with scathing criticism from liberals after its consultants ran campaign ads supporting Republican candidates in favor of the controversial Keystone XL pipeline and oil drilling in the [Arctic National Wildlife Refuge](#).

Sharry said that by taking a public role in the immigration debate, Zuckerberg may be taking a risk.

"The first one through the wall always gets scratched up," he said. But by seizing the moment on a controversial issue, the Facebook CEO and Fwd.us aren't "on the defensive, but leaning in."

Revealing a secret

Vargas made national headlines in 2011 when he revealed his long-held secret in a [New York Times Magazine](#) cover story, "My Life as An Undocumented Immigrant."

His film, which premiered on the East Coast last month at the [American Film Institute's](#) documentary festival, won raves.

In the film, Vargas, who attended [Mountain View High School](#) and [San Francisco State University](#), relates how he has been unable to visit his homeland and see his mother for 20 years, "because there is no guarantee I would be allowed back."

<http://www.sfgate.com/politics/article/Silicon-Valley-steps-up-role-in-immigration-debate-4688048.php>