

Illegal immigrant runs for student body president at Texas A&M

By Susan Carroll

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Jose Luis Zelaya sat at a long table in front of a packed auditorium on the Texas A&M campus Thursday night, steadying his nerves for his second student body presidential debate.

The previous debate was carefully controlled, with a moderator asking each candidate the same question. But this time, he and the five other candidates would take questions submitted by fellow students.

One by one, the candidates expounded on a range of issues, including tuition, fees and student services. And then, toward the end of the debate, Zelaya got the question he dreaded most: How would his legal status play a role if he was elected president? It was an issue that none of his fellow candidates had raised during the campaign, despite knowing he was undocumented.

Afterward, Zelaya, 24, said he felt blind-sided.

"I'm not running because I'm undocumented. I'm running because I'm an Aggie," he said. "It's just like, what if I was gay? Would they have asked me if being gay was going to play a role? If I was atheist, would they ask me those things? What does it take to be seen as a regular Aggie, not as an undocumented Aggie?"

That Zelaya is an illegal immigrant is no secret.

In April, he stood in a plaza on campus, in the same spot where the elections commission will announce the results Tuesday night, and shared his story of coming to the U.S. illegally at age 14 from Honduras to escape an abusive, alcoholic father.

It was a bold move on one of the nation's most conservative campuses, where some student leaders have attracted national media attention for vocal opposition to a Texas law that allows certain illegal immigrants to qualify for in-state tuition. But it may not stop Zelaya from becoming the first openly undocumented illegal immigrant to lead the student body at A&M.

Naila Dhanani, the opinion editor for The Battalion, A&M's college newspaper, said Zelaya "definitely has a chance" of winning the election.

Working at age 7

"He has not been the most visible or prepared candidate," she said, "nor has he been the most proactive in his campaign for votes, but he has the support of many minority organizations ... as well as the support of those who feel underrepresented in the current administration."

Zelaya first started working in the streets in Honduras at age 7, washing car windows and begging on buses. His mother left for the U.S. when he was 13, unable to take the beatings from his father, he said. At 14, he set out to find his mother and his little sister in the U.S. The journey took 45 days and ended in a one-room apartment in Houston his mother shared with several other families.

"People told me I couldn't graduate from high school, that I couldn't go to college," he said.

Zelaya earned a bachelor's degree from A&M in December and led the invocation at the graduation ceremony. He aspires to teach, but can't because of his immigration status. He enrolled in January as a graduate student at A&M seeking a master's degree in curriculum and instruction, specializing in English as a Second Language.

'We all bleed maroon'

"Eleven years ago, I had nothing. I was homeless. My home was a bridge," he said. "I'm still struggling now, but now I have an education, and no one can take that away from me."

After Zelaya was asked the question about his immigration status at the debate, Brody Smith, a 20-year-old political science and history major who is running against Zelaya, raised his hand to speak. The senior said he thought the question was unfair and a political stunt, adding that he would trust Zelaya if he was elected president.

"He has an Aggie ring on his finger," he said. "And we all bleed maroon."

<http://www.chron.com/news/houston-texas/article/Illegal-immigrant-runs-for-student-body-president-3365470.php>