Tech Titans Fund Undocumented Students

By MIRIAM JORDAN

A group of Silicon Valley technology leaders, impatient with attempts to rewrite immigration laws, is funding efforts to help undocumented youths attend college, find jobs and stay in the country despite their illegal status.

The group includes Jeff Hawkins, inventor of the Palm Pilot; and the family foundations of Andrew Grove, co-founder of Intel Corp.; and Mark Leslie, founder of the former Veritas Software Corp. Laurene Powell Jobs, widow of Apple Inc. co-founder Steve Jobs, has for years supported undocumented students through her organizations that help low-income high-school students.

The Silicon Valley money is part of a broader response by individuals and states to Congress, which hasn't passed the Dream Act. That federal legislation would offer a path to legalization for illegal immigrants who graduate from a U.S. high school and attend college or join the military.

"We think Congress's inaction…is devastating for these students and tragic for the country," said Ms. Powell Jobs, who was one of the first in the tech community to champion the Dream Act by lobbying her congresswoman and writing an op-ed piece supporting the legislation.

The Justice Department has found Arizona Sheriff Joe Arpaio, a contentious figure in the national debate over immigration, runs a department rife with discrimination against Latinos. Devlin Barrett has details on The News Hub.

The focus of the Silicon Valley philanthropists is Educators for Fair Consideration, or E4FC, a nonprofit that gives scholarships, career advice and legal services to students brought to the U.S. illegally as children.

Companies that knowingly hire illegal immigrants can face civil and criminal penalties. Among other ideas, the Silicon Valley donors are studying the possibility of using unpaid internships as way for students to come to the attention of employers who might later sponsor them for a legal work visa.

After helping a few dozen students through college with small donations, the San Francisco-based organization expanded with money from the tech leaders. It now has enlisted immigration attorneys to offer legal advice to hundreds of undocumented students.

"We used to think, 'Let's just get them through college'" with scholarships, said Katharine Gin, a teacher who founded E4FC along with a college counselor. "We thought the federal Dream Act would pass and we would be helping these students in the interim period only."

Several of the Silicon Valley supporters became aware of the issue close up: Mr. Hawkins got to know an undocumented student at his daughters' high school. Liz Simons, daughter of the

founder of hedge fund Renaissance Technologies, mentored an undocumented honor student in high school who was struggling to raise funds for college because of his illegal status. Seth Leslie, son of Veritas's founder, had encountered undocumented students in his work as a schoolteacher and principal.

The money involved is relatively small: The tech philanthropists and others gave hundreds of thousands dollars in the last year to the group, whose 2012 operating budget is $600,000.

"I have chosen to make this one of my philanthropic areas," said Mr. Hawkins, who disclosed his giving for the first time in an interview but declined to state the amount. "It's still at an embryonic stage; I'm willing to crank it up as we find solutions."

California, Illinois and New York in recent months passed bills that enable undocumented students to receive financial aid for college. Thirteen states allow illegal immigrants who reside in their borders to pay in-state fees at public universities.

Despite bipartisan support in the past, the Dream Act never passed Congress after it became caught up in the broader debate over reshaping the nation's immigration system, including what to do with the estimated 11 million people in the country illegally. The latest version of the Dream Act was passed by the House in December 2010 but failed in the Senate, after it was tacked onto a defense-spending bill.

To opponents, the bill is tantamount to an amnesty program for children whose parents broke U.S. immigration laws; they argue it would entice more people to sneak into the country. President Barack Obama supports the Dream Act; Republican Mitt Romney has said he would veto the measure if elected president.

On hearing of the efforts by the group, Ira Mehlman, a spokesman for the Federation for American Immigration Reform, a national group that lobbies against legalization, said: "You'd think they would help people in the country legally who face difficult times getting a start."

About 65,000 undocumented students graduate from U.S. high schools each year, according to experts who follow the issue. The Supreme Court has ruled it unconstitutional to deny a K-12 public education to children who are in the country illegally.

But after that, their future is uncertain because they can't qualify for federal grants, work-study programs or bank loans to finance college nor can they obtain work legally.

U.S. tech companies have long backed raising the number of visas the government issues for skilled immigrants such as software engineers, and argue the country is losing its competitive edge as other economies attract skilled labor forces.

At a recent gathering in Los Altos, Calif., an undocumented 23-year-old with a degree in civil engineering, which he obtained on a scholarship, told funders of E4FC that he had five job offers in the last two months, only to have them revoked because of his immigration status. He said he

has been willing to work for no pay to accrue experience required for a professional engineering license. Even that has proved challenging.

The U.S. has "put a lot of money into [undocumented students] already," said Eva Grove, wife of Intel's co-founder, whose family foundation gave $1 million to immigration-related groups last year. "It makes no sense to dead-end them after they are educated."

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