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Virginia student graduates from high school, braces for deportation

By [Eli Saslow](#), Published: June 10

CHESTERFIELD, Va. — Mother and daughter sat together in their basement apartment last Thursday, deadlocked in the same conversation they had been having for weeks. The daughter’s high school graduation party was scheduled for the next night, but she had yet to hand out a single invitation. The store-bought cards were still wrapped in plastic on the kitchen table next to a box of cap-and-gown-shaped confetti.

“Don’t you want to enjoy this one last thing?” asked Dora Aldana, 40, the mother.

“Why bother?” said Heydi Mejia, 18, the daughter.

Why bother: It had become her answer for so many things during the past five months, ever since immigration officials raided their apartment and her senior year became a countdown to deportation. Why bother celebrating a diploma that would mean nothing in her new life, with friends she might not see again, who wore class T-shirts that read: “Bring on Tomorrow!” and traded tips about decorating their dorm rooms?

“For me, this week feels more like a dead end,” Mejia said.

She would graduate from Meadowbrook High School on Friday, her blue gown decorated with awards from the National Honor Society, the school’s AP program and the Virginia governor.

She was scheduled to be deported to Guatemala a few days later.

In the election-year debate over immigration reform, the situation Mejia is in has become one of the most debated of all. What should the United States do with illegal immigrants who come to the country as children, grow up here, break no laws and want to remain? In Mejia’s case, what should be done with an illegal immigrant who came to the country at age 4; who speaks better English than Spanish; who wants to attend Randolph-Macon College in Virginia and become a nurse; whose knowledge about modern Guatemala comes in part from what she’s read on Wikipedia?

Republicans and Democrats have drafted legislative proposals that would grant permanent residency to top students, but so far no bill has generated enough support to become law. In an attempt at a temporary solution, President Obama has instructed immigration officials to review cases and grant leniency to a small number of the most deserving students. Now a process that was once a simple matter of legal or illegal has become a question of merit.

A salutatorian from Texas was granted a last-minute reprieve after 2,000 people rallied on her behalf. A valedictorian in Miami avoided deportation in March by collecting 100,000 signatures and traveling to Washington for a news conference with a Republican congressman.

But what happens when you're ranked No. 22 at a suburban high school outside Richmond, where politicians haven't responded to your calls and school officials aren't sure whether to spell your name Heydi or Heidi?

Late this spring, while her friends stayed late after AP classes to fill out college applications, Mejia and her mother hired an immigration lawyer in Manassas to file a motion to reopen their case. The lawyer explained that nothing in the law offered Mejia reason to hope. Democrats had yet to pass their Dream Act, which would create a path to citizenship for students who came to the country as minors and completed two years of college or military service. A Republican congressman had only recently introduced the Stars Act, which would give illegal immigrants a chance to finish college and earn permanent residency.

"Our only hope is to show the immigration officials proof of every positive thing you've done and hope for leniency," the lawyer said, and so Mejia started working on an application of her own. She mailed off her SAT scores, her family photos, her school transcripts dating back to first grade and her certificate of participation in the sixth-grade science fair. She made appointments with teachers, confessed to them for the first time that she had come to the country illegally and then asked them to write letters of recommendation.

"Heydi is very polite, positive and full of energy," the principal wrote in an official statement.

"She is an A student maintaining a 99 average in my class," the English teacher wrote.

"Just a great person all around," the cosmetology instructor wrote.

Mejia typed up a lengthy cover letter, reusing phrases from her college essay about extracurricular activities and concluding her application with a final appeal.

"These are the people I know and have shared my whole life with," she wrote. "They are the ones I want with me when I'm graduating from college or getting married. I plead that you take this statement into consideration."

The Department of Homeland Security wrote its response one day after receiving Mejia's application.

"Motion to reopen should be denied as a matter of law," it read.

Her deportation date was scheduled for mid-June so she could attend her high school graduation.

A new life

Mejia remembers crossing the Rio Grande in the middle of the night, floating next to her mother on a wooden board strung between two tires. A man pulled the makeshift raft as he swam and told Mejia not to worry. The river, he said, was like a long, flat swimming pool.

They were caught by the Border Patrol on the other side and ordered to appear in court, but they didn't show up on the day of their hearing. The United States filed an order for their deportation — if they could be found — on Sept. 21, 1999.

In the decade that followed, Mejia and Aldana moved to Richmond to be near relatives and settled into a two-bedroom basement apartment they named, affectionately, “the hole.” Aldana found a job at a hair salon. She married Mejia's father, who worked in construction until he was deported in 2009. The family joined a church and a neighborhood association and a Sam's Club. Aldana gave birth to a son, now 3, who is a U.S. citizen.

Mejia grew into a teenager and started spending her money on tight shirts from Aeropostale, layering on mascara and highlighting her hair with red and then blond. She dated the drummer in the church band and complained to him about “senioritis.” She wore a Class of 2012 bracelet on her wrist and made appointments with a college counselor, narrowing her list to four small schools in Virginia. Her friends were mostly other students from AP classes — a diverse group of Hispanics, Indians, blacks and whites — and together they spent afternoons sunbathing on the banks of the James River. Some friends thought she was from Honduras or El Salvador. “Guatemala,” she corrected, “but it doesn't matter.” And she didn't think that it did.

Then, at 2 p.m. on a Sunday afternoon in December, nine immigration officials arrived at the family's apartment and read Mejia and Aldana their rights. Aldana had no idea how the authorities found them, only that they did. Both women were fitted with electronic tracking devices on their ankles and ordered to buy one-way tickets to Guatemala for sometime before June 20. Mejia hid her tracking device from classmates at school by borrowing an oversized pair of jeans from her mother. Immigration officials agreed to take it off a few weeks before prom and track her location by cellphone instead.

Her mother found it cathartic to talk about their upcoming deportation, so she told clients in the hair salon, prayed out loud in their living room and called her family in Guatemala to arrange housing as June neared.

Mejia told nobody at school for the first week and only two friends in the months thereafter. “I'd almost rather just disappear,” she said. She stopped filling out most of her college applications and told friends that she was “undecided” or “considering a gap year.” She blew off the last meeting for her college prep class, where faculty read off a list of students ranked below her who had earned \$5,000 college scholarships. She skipped a senior trip to the nearby water park.

Now only one celebration remained: Mejia's own outdoor party, for which they had ordered balloons, flowers and 20 pounds of carne asada — and for which Mejia had yet to hand out any invitations.

On the eve of the event, Mejia and her mother reached a compromise: They would not invite anyone from her high school. “I can't answer more questions,” Mejia said. Instead, they would give invitations

to friends from church, many of whom are also immigrants and all of whom at least knew enough not to ask.

“Let’s give ourselves this one day not to think about what’s coming,” Aldana said.

“Okay,” Mejia said. “I’ll try to forget about it.”

‘Glad that’s over’

Mejia arrived at the party with more to forget. Meadowbrook High’s official graduation had been earlier that morning, and she had sat in the third row of a basketball arena with 388 graduates and listened to a series of student speakers make pronouncements about the future.

“Become the person you want to be!” said the salutatorian, headed to Virginia Tech in the fall.

“Remain open, flexible and willing to adapt,” said the valedictorian, off to double major in forensic science and chemistry at Virginia Commonwealth University.

“I’m kind of glad that’s over,” Mejia said as she arrived for her party. She had changed out of her gown into a just-bought white dress and high heels, with pink acrylic nails and earrings to match.

Thirty friends from church were waiting in the back yard, and she walked outside to join them. They had hung streamers from the roof and tied balloons to the tables. A cake was decorated with a rolled-up diploma made of frosting. “Congratulations!” a friend yelled, and Mejia lifted her hand in a shy wave.

She filled a plate with food and walked around to greet her guests. “I’m so glad you all came,” she said. A relative mentioned that his daughter, who had also just graduated, was going to a community college to study education. A pastor told Mejia he loved her and was praying for her. A friend wondered what the beaches were like in Guatemala, or if it had any.

The guests filled her arms with presents, and Mejia excused herself to take the gifts into the house. There were tears in her eyes. Aldana followed behind, sensing that something was wrong. “She is exhausted, happy, upset, afraid,” Aldana said. “In one week, this is too much.”

The party would continue for two hours more. There would be cake and toasts and backyard soccer. She would say 30 goodbyes at the end of the night.

But now she walked into the house and closed the door behind her. Days left. “I just need a minute,” she said.

http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/virginia-student-graduates-from-high-school-braces-for-deportation/2012/06/10/gJQA6o7JTV_story.html